



# ***Vladimir Mayakovsky: Innovator***

Translated from the Russian  
by *Alex Miller*

Excerpts from Mayakovsky's  
poetry translated by *Dorian Rottenberg*

Designed  
by *Dmitri Anikeev*

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## Foreword

Mayakovsky was an artistic phenomenon on the grand scale. Among the hundreds of works written by him during his twenty creative years, we find lyrics, satire, plays, long poems, sketches, critical articles, and advertising verses. And yet Mayakovsky's true greatness is not that he had equal access to the secrets of poetic mastery and the laws of the stage, or that he could wield the writer's pen and the artist's brush with equal skill: he was first and foremost a poet, and it was as a poet that he became known to millions.

What gave Mayakovsky's work its remarkable scope and its tremendous appeal? What inspired him to create poetry which is read and re-read today by people of so many different countries and generations?

Some are inclined to see his greatness in his brilliant descriptive powers. Mayakovsky was indeed an outstanding master of the poetic word and reformer of verse. He enlarged the poetic vocabulary, introduced new methods of rhyming; he modified verse metres, intensified expressiveness, widened the implications of each phrase, and began to arrange his verse in "stepped" lines. But these innovations were only part of the picture. What mattered most was something else.

For a number of objective and subjective reasons, Mayakovsky's creative destiny was bound up with a historical movement which led to radical social changes all over the world. His acceptance of the ideals of the socialist revolution, and his understanding of the revolutionary transformations became the chief formative factor in his creative work. It was in this that the poet found inner freedom, and it was from this that he drew inspiration and found proof for the validity of his standpoint. And so Mayakovsky's real significance is that he was one of the first poets in world literature who was able to combine poetry with the ideals of the socialist revolution.

Mayakovsky made his creative début in 1912 with the publication of the poem *Night*. The rare quality of his poetic gifts became immediately obvious. His early poems are notable for tense rhythms, startling similes, and striking visual imagery. And the best of his pre-revolutionary works—*Cloud in Pants*, *The Backbone Flute*, *War and Peace*, *Man and the Satirikon* verses—brought him well-deserved renown. But truly wide fame as a poet of the people did not come to Mayakovsky until later, in the years of the Soviet rule, when his creative range expanded, having, as it were, absorbed the gigantic upsurge of revolutionary energy that came from a people building socialism.

Mayakovsky's revolutionary message did not appear in his poetry overnight. In his early poems, he was acutely aware of social injustice reigning in the world around him; but he saw no way out of these contradictions. That is why these poems are so full of suffering, sorrow, and tragic overtones. But his pre-revolutionary poetry is also full of compassion and a fervent, sometimes agonised, love of mankind crippled by the savagery of the capitalist system. As the years go by, in poet's approach there is a growing certainty that life will nevertheless change for the better, that justice will triumph in the world, and that there will come a time when such inveterate concomitants of human existence as selfishness, cruelty and violence will vanish from the face of the earth.

In a number of works written by Mayakovsky between 1915 and 1917, especially *Cloud in Pants*, the protest against the bourgeois mainstays of life is combined with the premonition of approaching Revolution. The feeling of bitterness gradually leaves his verse and the anguished notes die away. The poet is gripped by the joyful expectation of unprecedented changes.

October marked the beginning of a new stage in Mayakovsky's creative work. Henceforth, the Revolution was to be the leading character in his work. He saw it as the beginning of all beginnings; it was, for him, a symbol of freedom and justice, a source of joy and inspiration. Like a tremendous explosion, it was sweeping away everything that was old and moribund.

The Revolution gave Mayakovsky scope for lyrical expression. Hardly any significant or telling event during those years escaped his attention or failed to evoke a passionate poetic response. It can be said without exaggeration that his lyrical poetry absorbed everything of importance in the ferment of the twenties. The Civil War with its victories and deprivations, the famine in the Volga regions, the struggle against dislocation, the attempts by the capitalist countries to strangle the young Soviet state, the Curzon notes, the Conference of Genoa, Lenin's life and activity, the labour achievements of the people building socialism, their battle against the dark forces of religious fanaticism, hooliganism, drunkenness, and philistinism, the poet's tours of cities in the Soviet Union and his trips abroad, arguments about the conditions and objectives of Soviet art—all this and much else besides was reflected in Mayakovsky's poetry. His work is a unique artistic chronicle of thirteen heroic years in the life of the country, recording not only the most important events, but the spiritual atmosphere of that great and unparalleled time.

The poet's lyrical feelings often took the form of scathing satire aimed at the foes of the Revolution. He created a whole gallery of satirical images—bureaucrats, philistines, drunks, slanderers, and



Mayakovsky: photograph by A. M. Temerin, 1929.



toadies. It is important to stress that Mayakovsky's satirical attacks came from his desire to affirm the greatness and beauty of the new world.

The poet did not divide his themes into big and small: he wrote of the heroism of the Kursk workers who mined the first ore, about foundryman Ivan Kozyrev's new flat, of diplomatic courier Teodor Nette's heroism, of how worker Pavel Katushkin bought a radio receiver, of the construction of the Kuznetsk metallurgical plant, of Ivan Molchanov's poetry. But his lyrics did not lose their inspiration as a result or become petty and earth-bound, for in real-life phenomena and facts the poet could see and disclose a meaning which was of interest to many and thus make them universally significant.

The poet's lyrical gifts came into full flower between 1924 and 1930. He wrote hundreds of works, many of which became famous all over the Soviet Union: *Jubilee*, *Sergei Yessenin*, *An Epistle to the Proletarian Poets*, *Black and White*, *To Comrade Nette—Steamer and Man*, *Verlaine and Cézanne*, *Brooklyn Bridge*, *Homewards*, *To Our Young People*, *A Letter from Paris to Comrade Kostrov on the Essence and Meaning of Love*, *A Conversation with a Tax Inspector on Poetry*, *My Soviet Passport*, *Khrenov's Story of Kuznetskstroï and Its Builders*, and the long poems *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*, *Fine!*, and *Aloud and Straight*.

Mayakovsky's poetry absorbed what was new in the socialist reality emerging before his eyes. He disclosed the heroic face of the new era, and showed how "the new teems in people", how a new morality and the socialist attitude to labour was taking shape: how humanism and love for one's country were being charged with a new socialist content. His works express with tremendous power the ideas of Soviet patriotism and internationalism, and the fraternal unity of the workers in different countries.

It was at this time that Mayakovsky's poetry acquired new and fundamentally important qualities. His heightened sense of the times, his life-affirming passion, and the accessibility of a verse aimed, not at a select coterie of disciples, but at the democratic reader, are combined with the ability to find in life the features of historical continuity linking the present with the past. At the same time, he noted with joy the appearance, in real events and in the people's behaviour, of the shape of the future: "the flesh and bone of Communism", as he said in one of his best poems, *To Comrade Nette—Steamer and Man*. The poet's work was becoming truly party in spirit, truly popular art, and was setting out on the road to socialist realism.

These aspects of the life and creative development of Mayakovsky, beginning with the early poems and ending with the works in which he

reached the heights of realistic mastery, are examined in detail by Alexei Metchenko in his article "The Poetry of Mayakovsky".

A brilliant poet, Mayakovsky also knew the laws of dramatic art to perfection. Part of his creative life was devoted to the cinema and the theatre, which to him were one more form of expressing his personality. Nor did he merely write for the theatre and the cinema; he appeared as an actor. His plays *Mystery-Bouffe*, *The Bedbug*, and *The Bath House*, which were a great success in theatres all over the world, testify to his great talents as a dramatist. This aspect is thoroughly examined by Valentin Pluchek in his article "The New Drama", and by Boleslav Rostotsky in "Mayakovsky and the Cinema".

That he should have become the poetic spokesman for the new socialist ferment was not, however, Mayakovsky's only claim to originality. In creating the poetry of the Revolution, he also brought about a revolution in poetry. He extended the boundaries of poetry appreciation, taking it out of the closed literary salons into the mass auditorium. Newspapers, the radio, posters and the cinema became his favourite media. And his poetic art was not dimmed or destroyed by this: on the contrary, it gained new strength in drawing nearer to the sources of life.

In his article "Certain Aspects of Mayakovsky's Innovatory Art", Victor Pertsov clearly shows how the poet boldly widened the scope of the lyric. For his lyrical verse, history, the Revolution, and the life of society were not background material, but the basic subject matter of poetry. His lyricism was all-embracing, because it expressed the spectacular development of the human personality in the new society. As a result, Mayakovsky's lyrical verse acquired an epic quality. On the other hand, everything he wrote about was suffused with the warmth of a profoundly personal approach. His own feelings and thoughts merged with the thoughts and aspirations of other people described by him. Life in all its multiformity, as it emerges in Mayakovsky's work, has been transformed by the poet's lyrical interpretation. That is why Mayakovsky's epic poems are essentially lyrical. This profound intermingling of the epic and the lyrical modes also makes possible and natural the combination, within the framework of a single poem, of the personal lyricism and publicism. These aesthetic gains of Mayakovsky's gave world poetry new and fruitful opportunities for the artistic portrayal<sup>1</sup> of the world and man. What he had arrived at by insight and guesswork became, with time, a solid foundation for the development of contemporary poetry. The triumph of the revolutionary artistic principles applied by Mayakovsky preserved our poetry from sterile verbal preciousness, from formalistic experimentalism, and from superficial illustrativeness.

Although Mayakovsky is one of the most "innovatory" poets in world literature in whose statements it is not difficult to find—for a number of reasons—occasional suggestions of an ironic and even nihilistic attitude to the heritage of the past, his poetry nevertheless inherits and continues the great traditions of the Russian literary classics. Vadim Kozhinov's article "Mayakovsky and Russian Classical Literature" is devoted to the relation between Mayakovsky's work and the Russian poetic tradition.

Any conception of Mayakovsky's innovatory contribution to the development of artistic culture would be incomplete without some consideration of his influence on world progressive art. Art can, of course, proceed by different roads. But Mayakovsky's experience irrefutably demonstrated that only a poet who travelled along the main roads of historical development and who was at the centre of the "big" life, drawing his inspiration from the mighty movement of contemporaneity which was the socialist revolution, could be a true revolutionary and blaze new trails in creative art. This theme has been covered by Fainna Pitzkel in her article "Mayakovsky and the Development of Twentieth-Century Lyrical Poetry" and by Alexander Ushakov in his "Two Destinies: Mayakovsky and George Grosz—Their Attitude to the Revolution".

Mayakovsky's fame is not limited to the Soviet Union. His works have been translated abroad into thirty-four languages and his books have been published in thirty-two countries. Hundreds of books and thousands of articles have been written about him. His creative achievement has become an indispensable factor in the social and artistic life of many foreign countries. As a major aesthetic and ideological phenomenon of the twentieth century, it exerts a beneficial influence on the world's progressive and revolutionary poets. With the exacerbation of social contradictions in the bourgeois countries and with each new upsurge in the revolutionary movement of the peoples struggling for their freedom and independence, interest in Mayakovsky's poetry continues to grow. That is why lively controversies have been raging over his work for decades.

Although typical of an art closely connected with the heated atmosphere of "current affairs", Mayakovsky's poetry cannot be interpreted solely in historical terms. Moreover, as time puts a greater distance between ourselves and the period when the poet lived and worked, his poetry begins to reveal more and more qualities which are in tune with our own times. Much in Mayakovsky's works and in his aesthetic principles echoes the thoughts and moods of the contemporary reader. The poet's work proves to be bound up with the fundamental processes of history, with the solution of man's most vital spiritual problems. Alexei Metchenko's article "Mayakovsky's Herit-

age in the Modern World" is devoted to the problems concerning the contemporary significance of Mayakovsky's work. Alexander Ushakov's article "The Mayakovsky Tradition in Contemporary Soviet Poetry" shows how Mayakovsky's experience is interpreted by contemporary poets. The comment is made that Mayakovsky's heritage has become an inalienable part of the contemporary ideological and artistic atmosphere, which is a source of inspiration to poets of every kind.

The articles published in this collection give a broad picture of the innovatory element in the many and varied works written by an outstanding poet of our times.

The second part of the book contains selections from observations by Soviet writers about Mayakovsky. They are not so much personal reminiscences as reflections on his poetry. Anatoly Lunacharsky, Boris Pasternak, Kornei Chukovsky, Ilya Ehrenburg, Alexander Fadeyev, Nikolai Tikhonov, Konstantin Simonov, Mikhail Lukonin, Sergei Narovchatov, Eduardas Mieželaitis and others tell what Mayakovsky's poetry means to them.

The book includes a brief chronicle of Mayakovsky's life and work, and also a name index, both compiled by N. F. Ryabova.



**1**

***Vladimir  
Mayakovsky:  
Innovator***



Vladimir Mayakovsky belongs to the generation of Soviet writers who set out on their creative path before the Great October Socialist Revolution. His first published poem was written towards the end of 1912. Between 1912 and 1917, he wrote a number of talented works which marked him out as one of the best poets of pre-revolutionary Russia. But Mayakovsky is even better known as the poet of *Great October*, the poet of the new world, the revolutionary innovator. His works, whether lyrics, epics, or plays, are outstandingly original and are stamped with his own vivid and unique personality. With lyrical sincerity and epic majesty, they record his impassioned thought, his own spiritual crises, and the immortal chronicle of the Soviet people's heroic struggle in the era of the profoundest revolutionary breakthrough in the history of mankind.

His rare originality and the rapid and powerful growth of his talent very soon made Mayakovsky a centre of attraction or repulsion for various literary forces and aesthetic theories. World-wide recognition of his talent after the Great October Socialist Revolution gave the controversy round him unprecedented magnitude and ideological significance.

There are at the present time two diametrically opposite interpretations—each with its own subtle variations—about Mayakovsky's work. According to one, particularly wide-spread in the West, the author of *Cloud in Pants* and *Fine!* owed his talent to Futurism, the literary movement in pre-revolutionary Russia with which he associated his first steps in art. The true significance of Futurism has been vastly over-exaggerated. This unimportant trend, which, without Mayakovsky, might have been forgotten in Soviet Russia today, has not only been credited with everything achieved by Mayakovsky—and which was, incidentally, achieved under the influence of entirely different factors—but with what is generally inherent in great art, whether realist or romantic: the use of symbolic abstraction, for example, and quests for new words, new rhythms, new means of expression (quests which have not, however, become an end in themselves in true art).

Attempts to fit Mayakovsky's tremendous talent on to the Procrustean bed of Futurism have also been made in Soviet Russia mainly by people to some extent sympathetic to the Futurist movement. Either way, the poet is artificially isolated from all the many forms of influence exerted on him by the gigantic process of revolutionary activity and the entire pre-October development of literature. The poet's evolution and its character and direction are either ignored or misrepresented. This interpretation is anti-historical.





Mayakovsky at the exhibition *Twenty Years of Work* (1930).



The cottage in Baghdadi where Mayakovsky was born.

The opposite interpretation<sup>1</sup> does not ignore the outstanding originality and power of Mayakovsky's talent, nor his having been to some degree (negatively rather than positively) influenced by Futurism, which considered that poetry's main goal was verbal experimentation for its own sake, nor the relative importance of experimentation in art, nor the support given by the poet to the Futurist movement after October. But this interpretation, which proceeds from the *organic qualities* of Mayakovsky's talent—his unusually acute social responsiveness, the actively humanist overtones in his writing (all this was alien to the Futurist trend, which stood for the pure creation of form without reference to social aims)—does not isolate the poet's talent from the age and from the basic processes which determined its course.

<sup>1</sup> This is supported by Soviet literary scholars and poets. "Soviet poetry owes it to Mayakovsky," writes Pavel Antokolsky, one of the senior Soviet poets, "that it easily lost all forms of grouping, schools, and trends such as Imaginism and, later, Constructivism, which was first renounced by its initiator, Ilya Selvinsky. As for Futurism, it was blown up from inside by Mayakovsky himself." (Pavel Antokolsky, "Mayakovsky Is Still with Us", *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, July 15, 1973.)



The Mayakovsky family (1905).



The poet's mother (1950).

The advocates of this interpretation therefore consider a decisive factor in Mayakovsky's creative growth and in the direction he took as an innovator to have been the impact of the Revolution in all its complex manifestations. This was a dialectical process. Influencing and enriching the poet's talent, the Revolution forged it into a weapon for its use; and the more actively the poet became involved in the battles and transformations of the Revolution, the wider for him became the prospects of a socialist art and of unlimited innovation, compared with which the Futurists and their experiments were merely children smashing toys to find out what made them work. On the road of innovation opened up by the Revolution, everything which had been earlier created by the artistic genius of mankind and which had been



Mayakovsky with G. L. Kuzmin, S. D. Dolinsky, and V. V. Khlebnikov.

blithely thrown overboard by Futurism, was now seen in an entirely different light. This was the road of the true vanguard. The vanguard to which socialist realism rightly belongs. And it was on this road that Mayakovsky's talent as an originator was also to be revealed in all its power. But to return to his early period.

## I

Even in his first works, Mayakovsky presented an image of the poet as militantly opposed to the type of aesthete, prevalent in the literature of those years, who shrank into a shell of individualism, into a world of sterile dreams. Continuing, in his own way, the traditions of Pushkin, Lermontov and Nekrasov, Mayakovsky spoke of the poet's great responsibility to the people and of his prophetic mission.

The work of the young Mayakovsky is coloured by a tragic interpretation of contemporary reality. The central figure of his tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovsky* (1913) is the poet who dreams of showing people the road to happiness. But the world has long forgotten the meaning of the word: "A legend of anguish spreads over the city." Those who come at the poet's summons prove to be physically or morally crippled wretches who have lost almost all semblance of humanity. The poet becomes a central point of human suffering, and the tragedy of these unfortunates is the tragedy of the poet himself.

Drawing of V. V.  
Khlebnikov by  
Mayakovsky  
(1916).



Mayakovsky was not yet capable of understanding the causes behind the "gigantic grief and hundreds of tiny griefs", or of plotting a clear course of struggle for the people's happiness. This reflected not only his political immaturity, but the influence of the false aesthetic theories that narrowed his field of vision.

World War I, which condemned millions to appalling disasters and suffering, aroused in Mayakovsky the socially conscious poet, the fighter, the revolutionary. Everything that set him well apart from the Futurists but was not always clearly put by him in his first efforts—a passionate hatred for the world of oppression and lawlessness and distress for man crippled by the circumstances of life—found powerful and vivid expression in the works written between 1914 and 1917. These made Mayakovsky one of the most outstanding poets of the age.

The poet referred to his long lyrical poem *Cloud in Pants* (1915) as programmatic for his pre-October work, defining its content as four shouts: "Down with *your* love, down with *your* art, down with *your* system, down with *your* religion."

*Cloud in Pants* is a revolutionary poem, not just because the poet speaks in it of the impending revolution, but because of his attitude to the capitalist world, whichever aspects of that world it depicts. The four shouts "Down with!" are a passionate rejection of the entire system of monstrous social relations that condemn millions to suffering. All four themes are seen in a social context. In 1915 Mayakovsky himself considered the work as preparing the masses for an uprising (see his article "On the Various Mayakovskys").

Mayakovsky flings his wrathful "Down with *your* system" not only on his own behalf, but on that of the democratic masses for whose destiny the poet was becoming more acutely and deeply concerned. Indicative in this respect is the image of the lyrical hero in his works.

The singularity of this image and its polemical acuity were frequently employed as a pretext to accuse the poet of individualism. Attempts were made to find echoes of Nietzsche in Mayakovsky, as in the young Gorky. At first glance, the poet seemed to give grounds for the comparison by calling himself a "loud-mouthed Zarathustra". But it is enough to trace how he finally resolved the central theme of "the poet" and "people" to become convinced of the anti-Nietzschean nature of the "loud-mouthed Zarathustra".

Nietzsche's "superman" opposes the people and despises them. In his love for people and in his human dignity, Mayakovsky's lyrical hero stands in opposition to the "superman". At the same time, this "thirteenth apostle" (a second likeness of the lyrical hero) stands in opposition to the biblical apostles, refuting their doctrine of Christian humility.

The lyrical hero in *Cloud in Pants*, *War and Peace*, and *Man*, is a generalised poetic image which vividly portrays an ordinary, simple man, a representative of the democratic masses and, at the same time, a mighty personality reminiscent of the folk-epic heroes. It is typical that the lyrical "I" in these works should pass straight into the epic "we". Moreover, "I" and "we" possess the same attributes.

They are the rank and file, and not outstanding in any way. "Perhaps it was ordained so—in the human sty I am no newer in face than the rest," said the poet of himself. He saw the masses as "chain gangmen of the leper-house city".

The "little man", the favourite hero of democratic literature, who is portrayed with deep compassion but chiefly as the victim of an unjust society, acquires new features in Mayakovsky's poetry. Mayakovsky's lyrical hero is a rebel, a protester who flings a bold challenge in the teeth of the whole bourgeois system. A "simple man", he feels powerful and gifted. He does not ask, he demands. He is convinced that the "thousands in the streets", on whose behalf he speaks, have every ground for becoming lords of the world:

*No prayer so sure as muscle and grit.  
To the devil meekness be hurled.  
We—  
each of us—  
hold in our grip  
the transmission belts of the world!*

His active position as rebel poet and protester determined Mayakovsky's special place in democratic literature during the five years up to the October Revolution and attracted the attention of Maxim Gorky. Mayakovsky considered his meeting with Gorky in the spring of 1915 as the most important event in his life.

Warmly sympathetic to this young poet whom he felt be exceptionally gifted, Gorky helped Mayakovsky mainly by encouraging him at a difficult stage in his creative self-determination, in his quest for his own organic road in art. As distinct from the Futurists, who demanded formal experimentation deprived of social content, Gorky backed the poet in his aspiration to raise "questions of social conscience and social responsibility".<sup>1</sup>

Mayakovsky appealed to "social conscience" in his satirical verse of those years. Of particular power is the pamphlet *To You*, which castigates a bourgeoisie profiteering on the blood of the people and on the most sacred feelings of love for the motherland. Mayakovsky aims his satirical "hymns" at such institutions of bourgeois civilisation as "justice", science, and art, in which he sees hostility to man as a common factor.

One of the most powerful and courageous attacks in progressive literature against the imperialist war and in defence of man's right to life, joy, and happiness, is Mayakovsky's long poem *War and Peace* (1916). War is depicted as a world-wide tragedy, the cause of which lies in a social system based on the power of gold. The shattering picture of human slaughter is contrasted with the dream of a socialist society which has rid itself of the nightmare of war, offers a fraternal union of all nationalities, and acknowledges man's freedom and happiness as all that is really of value.

*Gloried be, Man,  
Forever and ever, live and be gloried!*

In the long poem *Man* (1916-1917), which sums up the basic subjects of Mayakovsky's pre-October writings, the theme of the tragic destiny

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<sup>1</sup> M. Gorky in the *Memoirs of His Contemporaries*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1955, p. 337.



Cover of the first edition of the poem *Cloud in Pants* with presentation inscription to A. M. Gorky.

В. В. МАЯКОВСКИЙ.

## ОБЛАКО В ШТАНАХ.

## ТЕТРАПТИХ.

of man in a world where capital is "Lord of All" has been elevated to philosophical generalisation at its greatest.

The Mayakovsky of the pre-revolutionary years was above all a lyrical poet. Short and long poems alike, and even the tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, are a passionate lyrical monologue, suggesting the cry of a tormented but not broken man (the word "cry" is the poet's own). In the young Mayakovsky, we hardly ever encounter the calm epic "narrative" note. Abrupt transitions from joy to wrath or from eloquence to denunciation are typical of him at this stage. Dissatisfaction and indignation predominate, at times becoming so violent that no verse, the poet feels, is capable of expressing them.

*Of this  
no poem can ever tell.  
Not for the poet's pampered tongue  
to lick the burning frying-pans of hell!*

Cover of the  
Czech edition of  
the poem *Cloud in  
Pants*, design by  
S. Stolovsky  
(1947).



Two contrasting features, heroic eloquence and satire, are prominent in the vocabulary and image texture of Mayakovsky's pre-October writings. The poet uses lyrical means to create the heroic image of man as a fighter and, at the same time, he pours all the vials of his wrath on those who have changed human life into a "meaningless tale".

Mayakovsky's lyrical hero and the masses he personifies are predominantly people of *great* soul. The image of the soul, or heart, is central to his pre-October poetry. He discovers inexhaustible wealth and unprecedented beauty in the spiritual world of the "chain gangmen of the leper-house city".

*I know  
the sun would fade out almost,  
if it looked at the goldmines of our souls.*

His poem *Going Cheap* (1916) is a true hymn to the human soul, and yet it is also a bitter and wrathful admission that its incalculable wealth

Cover of the first  
edition of the  
poem *War and  
Peace*.

**В. Маяковский.**

# **ВОЙНА И МІРЪ.**



Изд. „ПАРУСЪ“ Птр.  
1917.

is not worth a cent in the bourgeois world. This image of the human soul expresses Mayakovsky's humanism with marvellous power. It is typical that when, in the poem *War and Peace*, he depicts the rebirth of the world under socialism, Mayakovsky speaks with joy about the spiritual efflorescence of man:

*Oh, how magnificent am I  
with this, the most radiant  
of my numberless souls!*

The man of "great soul" in Mayakovsky's pre-October writings is contrasted with a loathsome and monstrous world of soulless creatures who have lost all human attributes. All that is spiritual, all that is lofty and beautiful, has been thrust aside in this realm of vulgarity by primitive physical appetites. Portraying the representatives of the bourgeois world, the poet conveys his revulsion and disgust with consummate expressiveness. Hence the scathing, "coarse" language born of indignation and wrath.

This image of the poet with his compassion for people and his willingness to begrudge nothing for their happiness is in sharp contrast to the individualism of the decadent poets. But the young Mayakovsky's lyrical hero is both strong and tragic; he is strong because of his eagerness for struggle, his irreconcilability to a social system which condemns people to suffering; he is tragic because of his keen sense of isolation, despite his passionate love for his fellow human beings.

Mayakovsky's pre-October poetry lays emphasis on the renunciation of the present for the sake of the future, when "people will come, real people, more human and better than god himself". That is why, although he began his career in the modernist camp, Mayakovsky, both in his experiences and in his means of expressing them, soon became identifiable as a poet democrat, a humanist, and a revolutionary romantic. For all its unorthodoxy of verbal expression, his romanticism, with its revolutionary message of renunciation and affirmation, brings him closer to the young Gorky than to the modernists. Those who interpret Mayakovsky's work as a conspicuous example of modernist or avant-garde writing ignore what is most important in his work—its message, its uninterrupted movement, its development, and the richness, depth and range of his passionate and essentially revolutionary thought.

The young Mayakovsky's political thinking was already on an unusually large scale. His protest in the long poems *War and Peace* and *Man* is "world-wide" in its scope. The unprecedented magnitude of the historical events at the time (the world war) and the poet's inclination for sweeping social and philosophical generalisations, were given a highly original treatment. The scene of the action in both poems is the whole world. Images and scenes are synthesised and enlarged, and there is a tendency towards the tragic or the satirically grotesque (the descriptions of the golden flood, the cosmic scale of the clashes between the gladiator-states, the image of the Lord of All, and so on). The plot is symbolic and often fantastic (the poet's ascent to heaven and his return to earth in the poem *Man*, for example).

The period from February to October 1917 figured prominently in Mayakovsky's ideological self-determination. He began to take an even keener interest in politics; and each new work during these

months was a step forward in the formation of his world outlook. In the extremely complex circumstances of the transition from the bourgeois-democratic to the socialist revolution, Mayakovsky made it clear that his course lay with the revolutionary proletariat and with the Bolshevik Party.

In April 1917, Mayakovsky wrote his poem *Revolution. A Poetry Chronicle*, in which he joyfully welcomed the overthrow of the autocracy. Placing his hopes on action by the masses, he expected that the February Revolution would result in socialist transformations and an end to the bloody war.

Political power in the country was now in the hands of the bourgeoisie, and Mayakovsky, reciting his poems in public and taking part in debates, denounced the imperialist policy of the Provisional Government and the treachery of the turncoat parties. Early in August 1917, he published his pamphlet *To Answer*, in which he attacked the imperialist war policy and ridiculed the social defence party who were justifying this policy with hypocritical catch-phrases about the defence of national "liberty". He unmasked the true aims of the war, which was being fought to bring in profits and grab fresh markets for the bourgeoisie. The poem *To Answer* was addressed directly to the soldiers and to the people:

You,  
 who's life is their sacrifice,  
 when will you rise,  
 upright and mighty,  
 and fling your query right in their eyes:  
 WHY  
 ARE  
 WE FIGHTING?

Mayakovsky passionately longed for a new revolution, pinning on it his hopes for an answer to all the radical problems of social life which had not been solved by the February Revolution. Enthralled by the growing might of the people's movement, he was cheerfully ironic about the person whom he had recently called "the Lord of All" and his "invincible foe" in the poem *Man*:

*Eat your pineapples, munch your grouse,  
 Your last day is coming, bourgeois louse!*

He wrote this on the eve of the October events. When the Revolution took place, Mayakovsky was one of the first to declare, in an address to all concerned with the arts: "We must welcome the new power and establish contact with it."

## 2

A new period in Mayakovsky's poetic development began with the Great October Socialist Revolution.

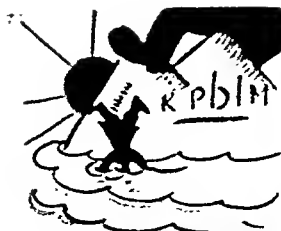
There was a sudden change in the ideological and emotional content and general tone of his work. Although the pre-October writings had been imbued with a dream of the people's happiness and the free development of man, a message of renunciation had nevertheless been predominant. "Down with!" had been the poet's condemnation of all the old world. From his first reactions to the October events until the end of his life, Mayakovsky's work was devoted to supporting the new system. "O, be four times exalted, blessed one!" were his words about the Revolution.

It is not enough to say of Mayakovsky that he sang with joy of the Revolution. With his poetry as a weapon, he fought shoulder to shoulder with the revolutionary masses as is demonstrated by his *Ode to the Revolution*, written in spring 1918. But the *Ode* was also a reply to the hysterical outcries of the literary "sackcloth-and-ashes brigade", who were lamenting the "doom that has befallen the Russian land".

Beginning with the *Ode to the Revolution*, Mayakovsky's main line of development as an innovator was the poetic interpretation of the new reality, new ideals, and new themes in the desire to devote his talents to supporting the Revolution. The poet saw the chief gain of the Revolution in the liberation of man, above all the working man.

The central hero of Mayakovsky's pre-October writings had been the poet finding his way to the people. In the Revolution, Mayakovsky saw "real men and women" for the first time—above all the people in their titanic might and their readiness to undergo any trial and make any sacrifice, but not to give up what they had won. The source of the poet's creative inspiration was his striving to establish contact with the people and with its vanguard, the working class. Mayakovsky's first after-October play (*Mystery-Bouffe*) and his first long poem (*150,000,000*) were about the people who from now on were to become the focus of all his thoughts and hopes. Reflections about art of the revolution (*An Open Letter to the Workers*, *Worker Poet* and others) were laid before the people for judgement. This entailed a change of genres, a search for new styles. Instead of the satirical "hymns", there were odes and marches (*Ode to the Revolution*, *Our March*, *Left March*).

From the first days of the October Revolution, the keynote of Mayakovsky's work was revolutionary optimism. No trials or difficulties could shake the poet's belief that life, as transformed by revolution, was beautiful. His view of the world changed. "The sky



1. ВРАГ ПОСЛЕДНИЙ ГОТОВ!

2. ПОСТЕПЕННО БУДУТ ОТГРУСКАТЬ  
ПРИЗЫВНЫХ СТАРШИХ ГОДОВ.3. ВЕРЯТСЯ СОЛДАТЫ К СЕБЕ  
В ДОМ,4. ЗАЙМУТСЯ ДЛЯ РАССВЕТА  
РОССИИ ТРУДОМ.5. ВДРУГ НЕ ЗАБУДЬ - ЖИВ  
КАПИТАЛИЗМ В 3/4 СЧЕТА.

6. ГОТОВ БУДЬ!

ВЕРИЛИСЬ, ПОСЫЛ. 1918.

### Posters for ROSTA (Photograph).

having forgotten the meaning of blue", had begun shimmering with all the colours of the rainbow: the earth, which until only recently had looked like "a convict with his head half-shaved by the sun", or had been infected by the vices of the private-property-owning world, now delighted the eye with the green of its meadows. Optimism was as typical of works which celebrated the great gains of the Revolution as of those which reflected the by-no-means-always joyful realities of daily life (*Kindness to Horses*, 1918 and others).

Poster for ROSTA  
(Photograph).

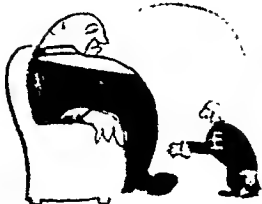


One of the poet's best works in the heroic years of the Revolution was *Left March*, a militant response to events about which the whole Soviet people was concerned in those days. "Russia shall not be under the Entente", "The Commune shall not be suppressed"—these were the slogans of the period to which Mayakovsky gave poetic expression. *Left March* is one of the first manifestos of revolutionary poetry. It was also the verse manifesto of Soviet patriotism. The Soviet



Poster for ROSTA  
(Photograph).

ГЕЛЕР ВЫЕХАЛ В АМЕРИКУ ПРОСИТЬ ПОМОЩЬ ПОЛЫНЕ



1. ПОЛЯНЫ И ДЯДОШНЕ  
АМЕРИКАНСКОМУ ЕДУТ.



2. ПОМОГИ!  
ПОВОДОМ К ЛЕТУ.



3. НЕ ДАВАЙ ДЯДЯ,  
СНАЖИ, ЧТО НЕТУ.



4. УЧИТЕСЬ НА МИЛЬБАНА ГЛАЗА,  
НА БЕЛОГВАРДЕЙЦЕВ И ЛОСН  
ПРОТРЕСЯ ДЯДЯ.

ВЕРСТОВСКИЙ РОСТА РОСТ.

people, who had combined a self-sacrificing devotion to the Revolution with an unshakable determination to change liberated Russia into the birthland of Communism, found in Mayakovsky a fiery singer of their heroic struggle. The poet spoke courageously of grief, famine, and death, convinced that the sufferings and deprivations were justified by the loftiness of the goal and that "the virgin land of the sun" lay ahead.

With its heroic message and its courageous and energetic style, in which the language of slogans, posters and public speeches had been transformed into poetry, *Left March* conveyed the high moral uplift, the readiness for battle and the desire for heroic exploits which filled the hearts of Soviet people in those days. That is why this short poem was so popular in the first years of the Revolution. *Left March* has so far been translated into twenty-eight languages of the peoples of the USSR and into nineteen foreign languages. For the progressive poets

Poster for  
ROSTA  
(Photograph).

# КАЖДЫЙ ЧЕМ МОЖЕТ ПОМОГАТЬ ФРОНТУ?



КАРТИНКА РОСТА № 507.

of the world, *Left March* has become the model of a revolutionary art addressed directly to the people and an example of true innovation inspired by life.

*Mystery-Bouffe* was one of the most brilliant triumphs of Soviet art during the first years of the Revolution. It was, in fact, the first Soviet play. The première took place in the Petrograd Musical Comedy Theatre on the 7th November 1918, the first anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution.

In the language of poetic allegory, highly original but entirely within the grasp of the general public at that period, *Mystery-Bouffe* spoke of the world-wide historical significance of the Revolution and of the most urgent current problems.

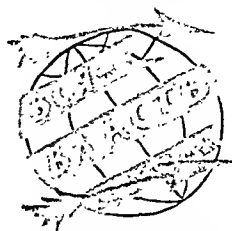
The demand to bring art nearer to contemporary life and to subordinate it to the tasks of the Revolution became Mayakovsky's artistic credo. He tackled the "creation of the new beauty" directly, taking an active part in the general national struggle, refuting the

Poster for ROSTA  
(Photograph).

Вопрос об электрификации поставлен в порядок дня съезда при крупном переделе: на трибунах Всероссийских съездов будут появляться не только политики но и инженеры  
ИЗРЕЧИ ТОМ ЛЕНИНА НАВ СЪЕЗДЕ.



ОГНИ ЗАЖГЛИ НАД  
ТМРОМ ИСТИНУ ЭТУ



ЭТА ИСТИНА РАЗНЕС-  
ЛАСЬ ПО ВСЕМУ СВЕТУ



З) ТЕПЕРЬ НАМ НУЖ:  
НЫ ОГНИ ЭТИ



«) ПУСТЬ ЭТОТ ОГОНЬ  
РОССИЮ ОСВЕТИТ!  
ГОСТА.У 742

standpoint of poets who were waiting for the storm to die down so as to reflect it afterwards from "the distance of time". Mayakovsky flung himself into the whirl of events, voicing his readiness to do any job necessary for the Revolution. He joined the valiant army of agitators and Party propagandists, proud of his role as rank-and-file member and builder of the new world. This was the road to life, to the hearts of the people. His work in the "Satirical Windows of ROSTA"<sup>1</sup> was a most important stage on this road.

His work for ROSTA was preceded by the publication of an album, *Heroes and Victims of the Revolution* and a booklet *A Soviet Alphabet*. As Mayakovsky put it himself, these were his "first attempts at agit-poetry".

<sup>1</sup> ROSTA — All-Russia Telegraph Agency.— Ed.



## НАСЛЕДСТВО ЦАРИЗМА И ПОМЕЩИЧЬЕЙ ВЛАСТИ

ВРЕМЯ И ЛЮДИ: разоренный крестьян, оскаменевший  
за историческую трудность.

ХОЗЯЙСТВЕННЫЕ РАЗМЕРЫ:

- |                                      |        |
|--------------------------------------|--------|
| 1. Среднее хозяйство помещика на 400 |        |
| 2. Усадьба с рабочими помещика       | на 400 |
| 3. Усадьба с двором                  | на 400 |
| 4. Усадьба с садом                   | на 400 |

### ЧТО ДАЛА РЕВОЛЮЦИЮ КРЕСТЬЯНОСТИ

1. Она уничтожила помещичье землевладение и отдала его земле трудящемуся.
2. Она уничтожила крепостное право.
3. Она отменила гонимую власть помещиков и крестьян.
4. Она отменила власть помещиков и крестьян.
5. Она отменила власть помещиков и крестьян.
6. Она отменила власть помещиков и крестьян.
7. Она отменила власть помещиков и крестьян.
8. Она отменила власть помещиков и крестьян.
9. Она отменила власть помещиков и крестьян.
10. Она отменила власть помещиков и крестьян.



### КРЕСТЬЯНСКОЕ ХОЗЯЙСТВО ДОЛЖНО БЫТЬ ВОССТАНОВЛЕНО, НО.

чтобы поднять его, необходимо прежде всего  
восстановить его скотоводство

и  
обеспечить инвентарем и сельскохозяйственным машинами.  
Справиться с этими задачами нельзя в одиночку и разрозненно  
ПОМОЩЬ ОРГАНИЗОВАНО МОЖЕТ ТОЛЬКО ГОСУДАРСТВО

ДЛЯ ЭТОГО ГОСУДАРСТВУ НУЖНЫ  
ОГРОМНЫЕ ДЕНЕЖНЫЕ СРЕДСТВА—  
НЕ МЕНЬШЕ 400-500 МИЛЛИОНОВ  
РУБЛЕЙ ЗОЛОТОМ ЕЖЕГОДНО.

СОБИРАТЬ НЕОБХОДИМЫЕ ЕМУ СРЕДСТВА  
ГОСУДАРСТВО МОЖЕТ ТОЛЬКО НАЛОГАМИ  
И ПОТОМУ НАЛОГИ  
ПОЖЕ БЫТЬ УПЛАЧЕНЫ ПОЛНОСТЬЮ И  
В СРОК,

ибо они собираются на нужды крестьянского хозяйства, окончательное  
восстановление которого составляет главнейшую задачу Советской власти.

Poster for ROSTA  
(Photograph).

Mayakovsky joined ROSTA early in October 1919, at a time when fourteen imperialist states had launched against the Soviet Russia the campaign which was to end so ignominiously for them. A grave threat hung over the country. It was at this difficult time that Mayakovsky went into full action as an agitator.

"Satirical Windows of ROSTA" is an original genre of poster art in which Mayakovsky brought to fulfilment his rare poetic gifts and his remarkable talent for drawing. His experience with ROSTA featured prominently in the transformation of the poster. Taking his cue from the Russian folk art of the *lubok*<sup>1</sup>, Mayakovsky created a new kind of poster in which drawings and verse were indivisible.

The work for ROSTA enriched and deepened Mayakovsky's ideas about the essential processes of the Revolution. He now began to write impassioned verse about the Party, its organisational function at the front and in the rear, and its political and moral authority among the masses. Mayakovsky saw the Communist Party as a force capable of leading the whole of working mankind in its struggle against capitalism.

The source of Mayakovsky's inspiration, the basic principle of the new aesthetics crystallising out in his work, lay in the kinship with the people and the power of the truth which were the decisive factors in every policy move made by the Communist Party.

Socialist art had been given valid conditions for success and, inspired by the ideals of Communism, had joined combat with its mortal foe, bourgeois decadent art, which had not the slightest intention of leaving the arena voluntarily, although the Revolution had cut the ground from under its feet. Mayakovsky considered that the Party's harmonious system of views and actions were the right ones, and this was of crucial importance to him in his battle with decadence and in his own poetic quests. In the full flush of work for ROSTA, he affirmed:

*I swear,  
a poet I'd never be  
if this weren't  
the main theme of mine:  
the boundless horizons of the RCP  
and our sky  
with five-pointed stars ashine!*

---

<sup>1</sup> *Lubok*—a near equivalent of the English broadsheet or broadside.—Tr.

In elaborating new genres of mass agitation poetry, Mayakovsky brought his innovatory genius to bear on the development of one of the most deep-rooted traditions in Russian literature. The distinguished Russian critic and writer Nikolai Chernyshevsky was convinced that literature does not deserve the name unless it "guides public opinion, prepares and facilitates improvements in the life of the nation, and averts mistakes and disaster with its instructions and advice".<sup>1</sup>

Pursuing a course of active involvement in life, Mayakovsky restructured all poetic forms and genres, obliterating the dividing line between "high" ("poetical") and "low" ("publicistic") genres. "Within the literature of one class," he wrote, "there is only a difference between qualifications; there is no difference between high and low genres" ("Expanding the Verbal Base"). In 1930, when he put on show various examples of his work as an artist at the exhibition "Twenty Years' Work", Mayakovsky stressed: "The newspaper, the poster, the slogan, the debate and advertisement, contemptuously brushed aside by the pure lyricists, have been put on exhibition as the most important forms of literary weapon."

The intrusion of agitational poetry into life and the direct address to the masses as a means of evoking a response in the form of action, influenced the poet's demands in his work on words and images: the need to achieve clarity, compression, and total conviction. When preparing in 1930 a separate edition of the texts for "Windows of ROSTA", Mayakovsky wrote: "To me this is a book of great literary importance, a work which has been shelling our vocabulary of poetic husks on themes which do not allow of verbosity."

While working for ROSTA, Mayakovsky wrote a poem *150,000,000* (1919-1920) notable in its search for a new heroic epic. The poem depicts in fairy-tale and heroic romantic images the world historical nature of the Great October Socialist Revolution. The poem's message is in the national pride evoked by the international feat of the Russian people — a fairy-tale hero who shows the peoples of the world the way to happiness. In *150,000,000*, Mayakovsky generalises from the observations and thoughts which we find in "Windows of ROSTA" and in a number of short poems (*Striking Facts*, etc.)

*150,000,000* is a poem about a new people which has made history. It tells with excitement how, as a result of the victory of the Revolution, the people itself has become Lord of All.

In "Windows of ROSTA", Mayakovsky portrayed revolutionary Russia as a synonym of the truth lighting the way to happiness for all the peoples of the world. Ivan, the hero of *150,000,000*, personifies the

<sup>1</sup> N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Collected Works*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1949, Vol. IV, p. 881.

new Russia; he carries the great truth of Communism out into the world. He is not a conqueror clearing the way with fire and sword: he goes to his enemy's camp unarmed and his only weapon is the knowledge that he is in the right.

Diametrically opposite to Ivan is the poem's other character, Wilson, who represents American imperialism. Armed to the teeth, he serves as a living personification of war. There is no crime which this monster would hesitate to commit. In drawing this image, Mayakovsky was elaborating on one of the militant themes in his publicistic work during the Civil War period. Wilson, certain of whose traits suggest the Lord of All in Mayakovsky's poem *Man*, nevertheless evokes a quite different feeling in the author and the reader. He is ridiculous rather than terrifying. He is still powerful, but he is not omnipotent. Rephrasing Marx's celebrated words, he personifies the "obsolete form of life" which doggedly but unsuccessfully strives to pass itself off as progressive. The image of Wilson was a significant satirical triumph for Soviet literature in its early years.

In *Mystery-Bouffe*, *150,000,000*, and other major works written by Mayakovsky during the first years of the Soviet power as in his pre-October works, abstract romantic ways and means of artistic generalisation are predominant. The scene of the action is not specified in space and time. But the romantic abstractions in this case intensify the difference between what was and what is. If it is borne in mind that, alongside *150,000,000*, ROSTA posters were being produced from which it was possible to follow the most important events of the Civil War, then it becomes clear that symbolism of time and space were evoked not by an indifference to the concrete, but by the endeavour to convey the world-wide scale of what was taking place.

In *150,000,000*, Mayakovsky gives full rein to his desire to express his romantic conception of the Revolution in bright and festive terms. There is much vividness, brilliance and virtuosity in the style. But Mayakovsky sometimes loses his sense of proportion, and there are instances of floridity which contradict the author's idea that revolution and long-windedness do not go together.

Mayakovsky was still trying to approximate his own searchings for innovation to those being made at the time by the "Left" writers and the Futurists. As he was a talented poet, he doubtless extracted something of value from the experience of his fellow-travellers, mainly in the use of words for aural effect; but the "Futurism", which Mayakovsky defended during these years had nothing in common with the Western form and was also inherently different from the Russian Futurism of the pre-October period. The old name signified everything new and the unusual to which the poet was drawn in his search for contact between art and the Revolution. What mattered most in his

relations with the Futurist movement of those years was his endeavour to restructure the movement itself. He was not entirely successful, but for him it was a fruitful process of liberation from any illusions he may have had that the "newness" of form which the Futurists advocated was nearest of all to the socialist revolution, since it had no roots in the art of the past. In overcoming these illusions, he was substantially helped by Lenin's criticism (two comments on *150,000,000*) and by Lenin's support (his reaction to *Conference-Crazy*).

### 3

One of the main features of the new historical stage which began at the end of the Civil War was defined by Lenin as the transition to the very heart of everyday problems. The road to Communism was much more complex than had seemed during the days of revolutionary upheaval, and it had to be covered, not by a triumphal march, but by slow forward progress, step by step, yard by yard, with no shirking of inconspicuous or humdrum work in any form. As distinct from many romantic poets who were undergoing an ideological crisis, Mayakovsky rightly understood the demands of the new historical stage and was scathing in his ridicule of poets who "had succumbed to melancholy", still floating about in the cloudy realms of abstract romanticism or "pure" art. He suggested that they should come down to earth and create the kind of art that would "heave the Republic out of the mud". As far as he was concerned, unpoetic themes did not exist. True to his conviction that the "teensy-weensy tasks of pure verse-making" were insignificant in comparison with the "broad aims of helping to build Communism with words", he had no qualms about writing advertising verse commissioned by various Soviet trade organisations. This new and, for a poet, unusual departure was clear evidence of Mayakovsky's struggle for a new kind of poet—master of his own country, patriot, innovator, ready to fight for socialism on any sector of the front.

At the end of 1923, inspired by a sincere desire to celebrate in poetic form the working achievements of the Soviet men and women who had begun the reconstruction of the country, Mayakovsky published his poem *To the Workers of Kursk Who Mined the First Ore; A Temporary Monument by Vladimir Mayakovsky*. The urge to sing what was heroic and beautiful in the day-to-day achievements of the Soviet people did not blind Mayakovsky to negative phenomena. Satire played an enormous part in his work during the twenties.

On the 5th March, 1922, *Izvestia* published, under the general heading of "Our Daily Life", a cutting satirical poem by Mayakovsky entitled *Conference-Crazy*, in which he issued a battle call for the struggle against bureaucracy, an evil inherited from the previous regime.



The poem has all the characteristics of Mayakovsky's satirical style, notably the inflation of the imagery to grotesque proportions:

*Enraged,  
like a herd of stampeding elephants,  
I tear in,  
the wildest of curses issuing.  
Gosh!  
Only halves of people in evidence!  
"Where are they,"  
I holler,  
"the halves that are missing?!"*

As Lunacharsky testifies, Mayakovsky's poem "amused Lenin very much, and he even used to quote certain lines".<sup>1</sup> Speaking at a session of the Communist faction of the All-Russia Congress of Metal-Workers with a report "The International and Domestic Situation of the Soviet Republic", Lenin emphasised the correctness of the political evaluation of bureaucracy given by Mayakovsky in his poem.<sup>2</sup>

Lenin's reaction to *Conference-Crazy* was an important event in Mayakovsky's life.

Lenin's analysis of the social evil lampooned in *Conference-Crazy* made the poet aware of entirely new aspects and associations in the phenomenon he had described. He knew well that bureaucracy was often a form of struggle by the adherents of the old regime (there were more than a few of them among the employees of Soviet institutions at that time) with Soviet democratic laws. But, in ridiculing those who were "conference-crazy", it is doubtful whether the poet saw as clearly as did Lenin the connection between them and the futile administrators of the time who were formulating empty resolutions instead of getting on with the job. Lenin carried the social implications of Mayakovsky's satire further, thus mapping out the road for the Soviet satire of the future. Lenin's profound and comprehensive analysis of bureaucracy served as a model for Mayakovsky in his subsequent satirical verse, whether he was ridiculing the bureaucrats of the Pobedonosikov type, or speaking in defence of satire at debates.

But Lenin's reaction to *Conference-Crazy* was not just important to Mayakovsky as a satirist: it reassured him that he was right in turning to political poetry which affirmed the ideals of Communism. "...If Ilyich acknowledges that my political direction is

<sup>1</sup> A. Lunacharsky, "Lenin and Art", the journal *Artist and Spectator*, Nos. 2-3, 1924, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> See: V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 33, p. 223.

the right one, it follows that I am achieving successes in Communism. This is what is most essential and most vital to us poets!"<sup>1</sup>

The socialist revolution, which signified the radical reconstruction of all the foundations of social life, took as its ultimate objective the formation of a new man, a new individual, and thus offered up unprecedented prospects for the development of lyrical poetry. But the emergence of the new lyricism was a complex process, not always clearly understood by the poets themselves or by the literary critics.

*I Love* is Mayakovsky's first love poem after the October Revolution. It is filled with a sense of the immeasurable prospects opened up for mankind by the victory of the Revolution. A radiant feeling of joy and happiness puts this poem on a level with Mayakovsky's revolutionary patriotic lyrics. The crucible of revolution melts down everything that has filled man's life with nightmare in the old world and creates conditions for the manifestation of all the best sides of the human personality. This thought is behind all the motifs in *I Love*, giving it an optimistic colouring and powerful humanist overtones.

*I Love* is above all a hymn to man's heart which can encompass the whole world. Man and the world are one. This mood is not to be found in Mayakovsky's pre-October work. It was given to him by the Revolution. In the unity of man and the world, the poet saw the beginning of that joyous and radiant emotion which he called "gigantic love".

Where man is oppressed and power belongs to the "fatties", there can be no harmony between man and the world. At the beginning of the poem, the "fat bellies" have robbed the hero of the joy of life, holding him down under terror of famine ("I used to hate fat bellies from childhood, always selling myself for a dinner"); then they took away the great and beautiful world, stole the sun, immured him in the stone walls of a prison cell. But they did not manage to destroy the hero's love of life.

"Gigantic in love, gigantic in hate" is how Mayakovsky defined his attitude to the world in *I Love*. This poetic formula corresponds to the division of the world in *Mystery-Bouffe* and *150,000,000*. It testifies to the unity of all the poet's work—lyrics, plays, and epics alike.

Love for woman, as Mayakovsky understood it, is not a refuge from the storms and crises of life. On the contrary, for the lyrical hero of his works it is a fullness of the feelings and a generosity in their expression that completely exclude any egoistic withdrawal into self. The poet's heart, brimming with a sense of life, with impressions of being, is

<sup>1</sup> See: A. Epstein, "A Meeting with Mayakovsky", the journal *Chervony Shlyakh*, Kharkov, Nos. 5-6, 1930.

unable to bear this burden in solitude. For him, to love means to give unreservedly to another being everything that is best in oneself. Above all, to give and not to take. The hero of the poem experiences an enormous joy as he gives his beloved all the "unexpended load" of his feelings.

For Mayakovsky, "personal" and "social" poetry were not two irreconcilable extremes, but two ways of expressing an integral attitude to the world. And so Mayakovsky does not dissociate the happiness of love, that most intimate of feelings, from active struggle against social conditions unworthy of man. He takes love from the "wee snug world" of private rooms into the great world of struggle outside.

*It* resembles *I Love* in the identical understanding of the "essence of love"—a great, pure feeling that makes man akin to the world and to people, and which does not sever, but unites. But there is one no less essential difference. Attention in *It* is focussed on the drama of conflicts in the break-through era.

It is above all the conflict between the greatness of the ideals in whose name the Revolution was accomplished and the difficulties of accomplishing them that face people who have the rust of the old world in their souls and are often slaves to the philistine way of life and to the philistine notion of "family happiness".

The ideal of love defended by Mayakovsky in *It* is expressed with great clarity in the closing stanzas, which are inspired by lofty passion and which exemplify the lyricism of great social fervour. The poet defines exactly what he means by love, with what he is dissatisfied, and for what he is struggling:

...to love—

with love no more a sorry servant  
of matrimony,

lust  
and daily bread,

but spreading out  
throughout the universe

and further,  
forsaking sofas,

cursing boudoir and bed.  
No more to beg

for one day as a dole  
and then to age

in endless sorrow drowned,  
but to see all the globe

at the first call  
of "Comrade!"

turn in glad response around.

No more a martyr  
  to that hole one calls one's hearth,  
but to call everybody  
  sister,  
  brother,  
to see your closest kin  
  in all the earth,  
aye, all the world  
  to be your father and your mother.

For Mayakovsky, the ideal of love and family happiness is inseparable from comradeship, from a feeling of kinship with the whole of working mankind. Such a concept of love was new to world lyrical poetry, but it was the natural outcome of all Mayakovsky's activity after October 1917; it was imbued with the light of Communism.

*It, I Love*, and all the love poems also have in common the theme of fidelity and the passionate dream of an abiding, pure, integral relationship between man and woman.

But real life and real relationships (especially those of the poet with his daily surroundings) were, during the period of the New Economic Policy, a long way from the ideal adumbrated in *It*. The poet sees three ways of overcoming the contradiction: the way of compromise ("perhaps you're worming your way into their caste?"), the way of tragic withdrawal, and the way of struggle. Rejecting and castigating the first two, the hero of the poem chooses the third way as the only one worthwhile. Mayakovsky advocates the revolutionary cleaning of the Augean stables of bourgeois life, for otherwise there can be no successful progress towards Communism.

The battle against philistinism in the poem *It* is seen as integral to the struggle for the liberation of all mankind from the toils of private property. His visit to Europe in 1922 left Mayakovsky even more irreconcilably opposed to any manifestations of philistinism in the daily life, conduct, views and tastes of Soviet men and women.

The plot of the poem unfolds in a very complex and whimsical way. Mayakovsky is trying to solve a difficult problem: how to relate the spiritual world of the individual and his personal drama to the destiny of the world and to the dramatic collisions of the era. The point of intersection of all these plot lines is the lyrical hero, his feelings and his thoughts. The torments of love, discord, the hero's break with the woman he loves, the inner shock, the pain—all this gives special drama to the conflict, illustrated in the poem, between the socialist individual and the philistine way of life.

In 1924, Mayakovsky wrote one of the most remarkable of all his works—the long poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*.

Like the rest of the people, the poet was deeply distressed when Lenin died. As early as 1920, he had written in the short poem *Vladimir Ilyich*: "In Lenin I glorify the faith of the world and my own faith." In 1923, Mayakovsky began to think over his plan for a poem about Lenin. The whole of the year passed in concern for the life of Vladimir Ilyich. The poet took very much to heart the government bulletins about the state of Lenin's health, as can be seen from the poem *We Don't Believe It!* Lenin's death finally prompted Mayakovsky to carry out a plan which had long been fermenting in his mind.

Innovation was integral to Mayakovsky's talent. But perhaps no work of his revealed, as did the poem about Lenin, the high sense of responsibility before history and before art that accompanied the poet in his quest for the new.

The design of the poem is unusual for literature as a whole as well as for Mayakovsky. "The Lenin Story" is more than the biography in verse of an outstanding personality. It is a poetic, philosophical and historical interpretation of what was fundamental and most important in Lenin—his life's work, his historical achievement.

The poem was conceived as a narrative about a popular leader such as mankind had never known before. This theme was inseparably linked with that of the people and the Party. This thematic unity reveals the poet's view of the chief characteristic of the historical process in the epoch of the proletarian revolution.

Mayakovsky's vision included, with Lenin, the working class and its leading role in the struggle for the liberation of working people from capitalist enslavement. He measured the maturity of the masses by their political growth and social involvement. The structure of the poem clearly shows the role given by the poet to the masses in the historical process. The leading character of the first part is the people. In the second and central part, we see Lenin's activity in close conjunction with the people and the Party. The heroes of the third part are the people and the Party, stricken by Lenin's death, but confidently and unswervingly advancing to their appointed goal along Lenin's way.

In his poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*, Mayakovsky endeavoured principally to paint a portrait of Lenin, to record Lenin's unique traits and to highlight, with a vividness of which only art is capable, what was typical in his achievement.

But can there be such a thing as typical activity on the part of a genius, of a rare person? Mayakovsky answers in the affirmative. Yes, Lenin was a genius among geniuses; and for this reason he epitomised

so completely and with such power the essence of the struggle, inevitable in our time, for Communism.

In this poem Mayakovsky was the first in the history of poetry to attempt solving from a Marxist standpoint the problem of the relationship between an outstanding personality and history. Lenin in Mayakovsky's poem is a popular leader in the true sense of the word, that is, a leader of genius. Chernyshevsky considered that "an unusual personality is the best expression of man and human nature in general", that "a great man, a rare man, is a total man; a man of genius is a real man, and only a military leader of genius or a scholar of genius deserves to be called a military leader or a scholar"<sup>1</sup>.

But, from the first to the last line, Mayakovsky attacks the idealistic exaggeration of the part played by personality in history. In the introduction to the poem, Mayakovsky ridicules various "lofty similes" ("prophet", "epoch", "era") used by the poets and publicists when they tried to convey Lenin's greatness. Behind the old-fashioned, outworn similes and metaphors lay ideas of the hero as a rare being hostile to the "mob".

To portray the typical image of a new kind of leader who discloses the laws of history in the "secrets" of history and who channels the spontaneous anger of the masses into a single-minded and conscious struggle for socialism—this plan alone is impressive enough in its grandeur. But Mayakovsky takes it even further. As a poet humanist, he "X-rays" each and every problem with the ideal of the free man of the future who will be "more human and better than god himself". He lived by this dream of such a man until October. He saw the real incarnation of his dream in Lenin. A leader of a new kind, Lenin was also the new man in whom, with remarkable vividness, the characteristics of the man of the Communist future are already discernible. In him, the essential is inseparable from the necessary. Mayakovsky writes with inspiration of Lenin as the most earthly of all people, as the most human of human beings; yet there is nothing in Lenin that tallies with idealistic concepts of the man of action who rises superior to other people. The poet vigorously contrasts the earthly Lenin with the superman hero (a type sung until quite recently by certain Symbolists and Acmeists). There is nothing mysterious or "not of this world" about his external appearance and behaviour. He has the same outward characteristics as other people: "He's just the same as you or I." And precisely because Lenin is man at his best, his image inspires the poet, like millions of ordinary people, with a passionate desire to follow his example.

<sup>1</sup> N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, p. 139.

*I  
go to Lenin  
to cleanse myself,  
to sail on  
with the Revolution.*

But if the working people of all the world see in Lenin's personality and activity the ideal incarnate of the fighter for man's happiness, and if Lenin is a person who epitomises to perfection the positive features of contemporary man and in whom the characteristics of the man of the Communist future emerge with striking power and expressiveness, then the careful and truthful reproduction of these characteristics by a talented artist can only lead to the creation of an artistic image possessing great powers of generalisation. That is how Mayakovsky approached his task. It was the approach of an artist who never ceased to feel himself a "fighter for the future". He strove to write about Lenin in such a way that millions of ordinary people would feel a passionate desire to continue Lenin's work, to "grow mighty as Lenin", to follow in his footsteps.

To "grow mighty as Lenin", as Mayakovsky understood it, meant to give rein to all the best that was in man. After all, Lenin too had once been an "ordinary little boy" born in "the backwoods of Simbirsk". But he had absorbed the huge world of historical and human destiny and had given himself wholly to the struggle for the happiness of working people, and this had made him the man of mankind, man's ideal.

Mayakovsky did not attempt the comprehensive and exhaustive portrayal of Lenin's activity and personality. He did not try to show Lenin in everyday life, in his relationships with his friends and intimates, although everything about Lenin was sacred to Mayakovsky. But when Mayakovsky introduces individual details or touches Lenin's physical appearance, these serve the main purpose of filling in the whole picture of Lenin, the man and the leader. For example, the poet mentions Lenin playing chess. This detail is used to create a link between the battles on the chess-board and the giant class battles in which Lenin's genius as a leader emerged with such amazing force.

Mayakovsky recorded with love and inspiration how dear Lenin's incomparable thoughts and deeds were to the working class, and how close Lenin himself was to the people.

To Mayakovsky Lenin's chief service as a new kind of leader was his creation of a party welded by unity of purpose, totally devoted to the people and representing the shock force of revolutionary energy which had accumulated in the country. The leader takes the masses with him and teaches them; but he also learns from them and is enriched by their experience and strength. Only indissoluble ties binding the leader, the

Party and the people could guarantee the victory of the socialist revolution.

*Revolutions*  
                                  *are the business of peoples;*  
*for individuals*  
                                  *they're too heavy to wield,*  
*yet Lenin*  
                                  *ranked foremost*  
  *among his equals*  
*by his mind's momentum,*  
  *his will's firm steel.*

That is why we also see Lenin's character in the collective, epic image of the Party. Mayakovsky said of Lenin that he was "with enemies as hard as any steel". He notes the same also with "the sombre guard of Lenin's stature".

This originality of approach, arising from the endeavour to grasp what was most important in Lenin—the nature and significance of his activity—demanded creative thought on a correspondingly large scale and the utmost meaning and expressiveness from each separate image, epithet, simile, and metaphor.

In grandeur and sweep of poetic thinking, *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* is well up to the standard of Mayakovsky's earlier long poems. The image of Lenin is inseparable from world history. Moreover, history is not a background, but "a typical set of circumstances" which becomes part of the hero's "life story". But the poet's thoughts acquire a new quality in the poem. He starts out, as a rule, from a living feature, a detail, a real-life episode and, widening the range of ordinary vision, discloses the special meaning inherent in it, revealing the general in the particular, the world significance in the "private" episode, the eternal in the transitory, the universally human in the individual, and immortality in death. The imagery in the poem is dialectical, specific, and synthesised in time.

The starting point that colours episodes of various magnitude is the picture, given in the prologue, of the people's grief. Mayakovsky's thoughts dwell for a time on grief-stricken Moscow in the light of the bonfires, with the people coming to say goodbye to Lenin; then the poet goes back into the historical past before returning to the starting point, with Moscow seeing the leader of mankind off on his last journey.

The historical digression is needed to answer the question: "Why such honours?" In reply, the poet illumines "vast spaces of the world" round his chief protagonist. In Mayakovsky's work, the historical





At the same time, the image of Lenin is developed on an epic scale—more often than not through his attitude to this or that historical event. The coincidence between Lenin's evaluation of an event with the essence of that event is typical of Lenin's ability to penetrate deep into the laws of history. This entitles the poet, when describing the critical moments of history, to use Lenin's own statements about them.

The choice of hero was bound to influence the style of the poem. Extensively reproducing the peculiarities of Lenin's thought and speech, Mayakovsky shows great restraint, sense of proportion, and tact. This demonstrates Mayakovsky's great poetic sensitivity. Lenin was remarkably modest and this could not be conveyed in the hyperbolic manner of *150,000,000* or in the complex metaphors of *It*. A different style was needed—austere, succinct, capable of conveying Lenin's message, of recording the engaging simplicity and profound humanity of the new leader of the new masses. Simplicity is characteristic of the poem about Lenin, but it is the simplicity of condensed thought, of aphorism ("The Party and Lenin are twin brothers..."), of the direct, frank expression of emotional shock.

In *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*, Mayakovsky is inspired in his defence of partisanship in creativity. The great principle of socialist art emerges as an organic essential of creation, as a bidding of the heart, as a poetic principle.

Write!—

*votes my heart*

*commissioned by*

*the mandate*

*of duty.*

A sense of duty is fused in the poem with a sense of the truth, very personal and yet at the same time permeated with Party spirit. The funeral scene is impressive in its startling and unusual similes, which convey the successive feelings as they overwhelm the poet: a bitter sense of loss, of despair, of terror—but also a joyous feeling of oneness with the masses, a feeling which fortifies and inspires a happy confidence in the future.

*Horror!*

*Shut your eyes*

*the infinity*

*of tight-rope grief.*

*As if*

*for a minute*

*left face-to-face*

*and blindfold*

*U*

*वृत्त. सं. ५*

*वृत्त. सं. ५*

*वृत्त. सं. ५*

*वृत्त. सं. ५*

with the only  
truth  
worth belief.

“The only truth” is the truth of Lenin, the truth of the struggle for the people’s happiness; it is the great truth of the Revolution, the immortal truth of Communism. Describing Lenin’s funeral, Mayakovsky creates a bold generalising image which gives the funeral scene a special meaning and makes it into a tremendous event of world history, with Lenin himself personifying the immortal truth of the age.

Straining,  
                    paining  
                            each puny iris  
I stand,  
                    half-frozen  
                            with  
                                    bated breath.  
In the gleaming of banners  
                                    before me arises  
darkling,  
                    the globe,  
                            as still as death.  
And on it —  
                    this coffin  
                                    mourned by mankind,  
with us,  
                    mankind's representatives  
                                    round it,  
in a tempest of deeds  
                            and uprisings destined  
to build up  
                    and complete  
                                    all this day has founded.

Thus, one of the poem's leit-motifs is the idea of poetic duty as synonymous with Party allegiance and merging with an inspiring sense of the truth. *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* is one of the most significant triumphs for socialist realism in the Soviet poetry of the early twenties. The positive influence of this creative victory was to be seen in the American cycle of poems, written immediately afterwards.

5

Beginning in 1922, Mayakovsky crossed the frontiers of his native country nine times. He visited France and Germany six times, and in 1925 he went to America. The rich personal impressions which he brought back from these travels helped Mayakovsky to create his masterly poems and notes about America and France.

Mayakovsky called himself a "plenipotentiary of verse", and fully justified the name. With great tact and ability, he defended the honour and dignity of his native land.

Mayakovsky had no preconceived attitude to European or American culture. In his poem *To Our Young People*, he appealed:

*Look at life*  
*without blinds or blinkers;*  
*through avid eyes*  
*ingest*  
*the best in your own land*  
*and all you think is*  
*worthwhile in the West.*

The poet's observations ranged far and wide: politics, the revolutionary movement, technology, culture, art, everyday life, morality, nature. In his notes and poems about Europe and America, honesty and objectivity are combined with keen-sightedness, wit, and the ability to pick out what was most essential, to evaluate each phenomenon from the Party point of view.

He admired the beauty of the Parisian squares, boulevards, and palaces: "And I love Paris beyond all measure (the boulevards are lovely at night!)"—he wrote in *To Our Young People*. In Mayakovsky's verse, Paris is not just the city of barracks and the Bourse, reactionary ministers of state and decadent poets, it is the city of the "French worker", the city of glorious revolutionary traditions. "You can't tear your eyes away from this grey other Paris"—he wrote with feeling in *The City*.

Mayakovsky was tremendously impressed by New York:

*There's lots to look at.*  
*for Moscow boys—*  
*Not to be covered*  
*in a day or two;*  
*New York,*  
*Broadway—*  
*a great big choice.*  
*How do you do!*



found and enrich progressive culture, to create a new life and a new morality.

In 1925, Mayakovsky went on a trip to America. The wealth of personal impressions he gained there enabled him to write true poetic masterpieces and a superb book of sketches, *How I Discovered America*.

Behind the vivid or insignificant, attractive or repellent realities of the Western capitalist world which was so alien to the poet, the reader is aware of the other real and not imagined reality of the Soviet land. The poet saw it as an example of the right solution to the most complex social, racial and national problems (*Mexico, The Lady and Woolworth, Black and White*, and others). His conviction that capitalism was doomed and that the socialist system was superior, and his feeling of patriotic pride are an undercurrent in Mayakovsky's poems about the West giving them inner wholeness, a unified emotional colouring.

These ideas and feelings are expressed with particular force in the lyrical poems inspired by Soviet reality in the second half of the twenties.

## 6

The great plan drawn up by the Party for the industrial transformation of the country found a talented and inspired propagandist in Mayakovsky. In his poems, dry statistics and bulletins are clothed in the flesh and blood of the living image, and the romantic and beautiful future of the republic rises over the building scaffolds.

Mayakovsky believed that the main task of the poet—"the fighter for the future"—was to inspire in millions of men and women a passionate urge for work, to reveal to them the new content and function of labour. He evolved genres which, as he saw it, suited these aims most fully. "In our days, a writer is a man who writes marches and slogans," he said in one of his poems. And, indeed, during this period he often made use of genres which he had first begun to develop from 1918 to 1920.

He wrote *October March, Defence March, Harvest March, March of the Shock Brigades*, and *March of the Twenty-Five Thousand*. In *Banner of the Sun*, the technique, first used in *Our March*, of creating a marching rhythm with a series of monosyllables, was applied in a new way. Slogans are also frequently encountered in Mayakovsky's poems of those years, and there are whole works consisting of slogans (*Slogans for the Komsomol Roll-Call, Slogans for the Young Communist International, Slogan-Rhymes*). The poet is, as it were, checking with the compass of Leninism every step the country takes.

He wrote a series of works which, to use his own words, might be called "lyrical reports": "... to you, Comrade Vladimir Ilyich, the republic reports today"—he says in the poem *Copper-Throated Factory Hooter, Cry Out in Full Blast!* Another "lyrical report" is the intimate, heart-to-heart *Conversation with Comrade Lenin* concerning the successes and difficulties of socialist construction.

Mayakovsky's work of those years shows that he could see life in all its complexities and contradictions, and was keenly observant of the sharp clashes between the new and the old. He was organically hostile to any attempted embellishment of reality. His poem *Round the Cities of the Union* opens with a general picture of his homeland:

*Russia is everything:  
the Commune and wolves,  
the capital's crush and the desert's vastness,  
the Volga rolling,  
unbridled, full,  
Kashira's brilliance,  
Obdorsk's darkness.*

Thus, Mayakovsky did not juxtapose the contrasting phenomena of reality solely in his writings on foreign themes. But these contrasts have an entirely different function in the works about Soviet reality. In the struggle between the emergent new and the moribund old, Mayakovsky tried to observe and record accurately what was most typical of the new Russia — a tremendous burst of enthusiasm for work and the unswerving will of the people who were fulfilling Lenin's plan for the transformation of the country. The poet turns to new, for him, creative genres: the lyrical sketch, the story in verse. The lyrical sketches include: *Round the Cities of the Union*, *Yekaterinburg-Sverdlovsk*, *The Blue Trouser Stripe*, and others. Prose sketches were also written alongside: *Newborn Capitals*, *America in Baku*. Mayakovsky's work in the second half of the twenties, though still vigorously agitational, is impressive in its persistent search for new artistic forms and means of creating an impact.

Mayakovsky lays bare his own soul and that of thousands of ordinary people. He is particularly concerned with the fate of the ordinary man. The growth of human dignity and patriotic pride in the working people who had become masters of their own fate is the central theme of his work from the middle twenties onwards. The

heroes of his poems are foundrymen, drivers, sailors, peasants, and typists. The poet willingly lets them speak for themselves, writes a cycle of "stories" about the construction of the new cities, about the changing conditions in the life of the workers and peasants, about their spiritual development (*Foundryman Ivan Kozyrev's Story of How He Moved into a New Flat*, *Khrenov's Story of Kuznetskstroy and Its Builders*, *Worker Pavel Katushkin's Story of How He Obtained a Suitcase*, *The Burning Filament*, and so on).

Describing the labour achievements of Soviet people, Mayakovsky not only expresses his delight in their heroism and superior moral qualities, he endeavours to encourage these fighters for the new, to lighten their task, to rivet the attention of Soviet society on them. He battles for what is new and progressive, showing it at the very moment of its emergence. This is the basic principle of typification and it predominates in the portrayal of the positive hero in Mayakovsky's work.

The tale of Kuznetskstroy belongs to a group of works about the heroism of Soviet people. The best of these, after *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*, is the poem *To Comrade Nette—Steamer and Man* (1926), particularly important for an understanding of the positive hero in Mayakovsky's work.

Mayakovsky saw the highest expression of man's triumph in the immortality of his deeds. Such was Lenin's immortality. But Lenin was a genius. Can the ordinary, undistinguished person deserve immortality? Yes, replies Mayakovsky; immortality is not given, but is won by heroic achievement.

Nette died in the execution of his duty, heroically protecting the Soviet diplomatic mail. He was an ordinary Soviet citizen, one of the thousands. Mayakovsky gives us a cameo of an intimate, everyday meeting with the living Nette when he was "once a man". Nette "drank tea", "argued nights on end" about a mutual acquaintance, "memorising poems" in his "funny way...". The purpose of all this is not to bring the hero down to earth, but to disclose the theme of the poem more vividly: immortality is not the lot of the "select few"; any ordinary man inspired by a lofty goal is capable of heroism which will remain in the memory of the people. Had the poet omitted these details, Nette would have seemed exceptional, since his whole life was heroic. Every single day of it, every hour. But the message of the poem is, in fact, that Nette's feat is only one example of the heroism of the Soviet people as a whole.

Affirming his idea about the immortality of the heroic feat, Mayakovsky develops the story on two levels. A thread of association runs through the whole poem: the man Nette and the steamer *Nette*. The theme of immortality is pushed into the foreground of the



composition. The poet sees a miracle with his own eyes: Nette still lives in the "smoking life of funnels, ropes and hooks". But this is a miracle of real life.

The depiction of the miraculous as law is one of the mature Mayakovsky's most important principles. The keen eye of the poet-politician discloses the miraculous in the mundane. It is the miracle of reality being transformed (*Wonders*, *The Americans Are Amazed*, and others). *My Soviet Passport* is a genuine poetic disclosure of the unusual in the familiar.

The poem begins with a kind of riddle: the subject is given prominence with a harsh antithesis and a significant pause, but is not named.

*I'd rip out bureaucracy's guts. I would.  
No reverence for mandates— good riddance!  
Pack off to very hell for good  
any old paper  
but this one....*



"The enormous theme of October", which had obsessed him ever since the spring of 1926, was not new either for Mayakovsky or for Soviet literature. But it would be no exaggeration to say that it was while Mayakovsky was working on *Fine!* that the October theme was mastered with particular fruitfulness by our literature as a whole. It is enough to mention such works as Alexander Fadeyev's *The Rout*, Alexei Tolstoy's *1918*, Vsevolod Ivanov's play *Armoured Train 14-69*, all of which appeared in 1927. Moreover, Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don* began being serialised in the first issues of the journal *Oktyabr (October)* for 1928. All these works have gone into the treasury of Soviet literature. *Fine!* has an honoured place amongst them.

The plot of the poem mirrors the heroic stages in the development of the homeland of socialism: its birth, its titanic battles for independence, its first steps on the road of peaceful construction. The poem's conflict is based on the clash of hostile social forces. Alongside the collective images of camps entering into mortal combat, the poet creates a host of characters, historical and imagined, and in each case he succeeds in presenting them as clearly differentiated individuals. In a number of instances, he deliberately contrasts the thoughts, aspirations and deeds of the representatives of the embattled camps: for instance, Captain Popov and a member of the Bolshevik Military Bureau, each with his distinctive speech mannerisms. In focussing attention on these images and showing by this means that the historical process is not an abstract concept, but results from the activities of living people, Mayakovsky nevertheless consciously refrained from structuring the conflict on the clash of individuals. He set himself another and no less difficult objective—to show, in realistic and historically detailed images and scenes of great generalising power, what mattered most in the revolution: the acerbity of class contradictions, the armed struggle for power, the immensity of the social shifts caused by the transfer of power to the people.

In drawing on the vast experience of world literature in the creation of human characters, Soviet poetry cannot dispense with Mayakovsky's own daring innovations—the description of phenomena on the grand historical scale and the portrayal of the masses at the peak of their social activity.

The people—the central character of the poem—come to life on its pages as an indestructible force welded together by the powerful urge to defend their right to be the true masters of their own country. Describing the particularly dynamic scene of the storming of the Winter Palace and skilfully using the tried and tested methods of metonymy and pun, the poet gives a convincing impression of the variegated forces that joined the uprising and of their solidarity before



But the poet was not concerned with epic breadth alone. He also arranged the narration of historical events so as to stress, by the poem's very structure, the heroism and drama inherent in the age.

Particularly dramatic is the fifteenth chapter, in which reference is made to Denikin's advance in the autumn of 1919 when a threat hung over Moscow, the heart of the Soviet Republic. The events themselves are not shown. The reader judges them from the behaviour of the philistine who crawls out of the woodwork, pinning his hopes for the fulfilment of his bourgeois "ideals" on the arrival of Denikin. Without actually describing any battle scenes, the poet conveys the tense atmosphere of a country in great danger. The same purpose is served by a daring historical discrepancy—the chronological association between Denikin's advance and the foul attempt to assassinate Lenin, which actually took place a year earlier on August 30, 1918. As a result of this dramatic tension, the fifteenth chapter marks the climax of the historical plot. Compressing time and intensifying the drama of events, the poet pursues his main goal—to show more vividly and in greater relief the inflexible will of the Communist Party, the heroism and self-sacrifice of the revolutionary masses, their infinite love for their leader, and their readiness at any price to defend their socialist homeland.

There is also an epic denouement to the story; the expulsion of Wrangel from the Crimea. This episode follows immediately after the tale of the attempt on Lenin's life. The actual sequence of events was different, but the poem has its own poetic logic. In following it, Mayakovsky purposely omits many known events (such as the clashes with the white Poles, the battle for Perekop, etc.), devoting the sixteenth chapter entirely to the panic-stricken flight of Wrangel's troops from the Crimea. By leaving it to eyewitnesses to describe some of the events in this chapter, Mayakovsky adopts the role of a historian collecting living evidence of this heroic epoch, while stressing, as it were, the "unofficial" nature of what has been narrated in the chapter. In this respect, Mayakovsky's handling of historical events in *Fine!* is highly original.

*Fine!* and a number of poems written between 1927 and 1928 prove convincingly how urgently Mayakovsky felt the need to show the deep changes wrought by the October Revolution in the relations between the individual and the new state system, and also in conceptions of personal happiness. He was convinced that, if correctly understood, the interests of the working people did not contradict the interests of the individual. On the contrary, he saw the power of the collective as a guarantee for the blossoming of personality. In the poem *Fine!*, the question of personal happiness is not considered separately from that of the people's happiness. But Mayakovsky understood superbly well

the complex specificity of the "personal" and its connection with those sides of the human ego about which he found it best to speak in the language of lyrical verse and in his own name.

The lyrical "I" in the poem *Fine!* is charged with far-reaching ideological implications. One of the central ideas—that of the unity of the individual and the state—is expressed most fully in the lyrical closing chapters.

It is impossible to ignore the frequent repetition of word "my", which makes itself heard with unusual force and freshness. None of the rank and file of the working people in the past ever declared with such pride, such a clear consciousness of his human rights: "my country", "my republic", "my militia"....

Merging with the people, the individual becomes an active force in the historical process. But for this reason the poet, as a participant in the whole people's struggle, has the right to weave into the fabric of his historical plot such facts as are "legitimate only as personal associations". This is why the poem's structure is so original. Defining the artistic principles on which it was based, Mayakovsky wrote:

*This is time  
                                 humming taut  
   as a telegraph wire,  
my heart  
                 alone  
                         with the truth,  
   whole and sole.*

*This happened—  
                                 with our fighters,  
   with the land entire,  
in the depth, too,  
                                 of my own soul.*

In this way, the poet and the people merge into an indivisible whole, as do the truth of the human heart and the truth of history.

In the "October poem" Mayakovsky's attitude to lyrical poetry is more generous than in the poem about Lenin, not to mention *150,000,000*; this is due to his profound concern with the problem of the individual in the socialist society. In the chapters about the Civil War, lyrical poetry makes it possible to penetrate into the deeply-lying social and philosophical meaning of the "mundane" episodes during that grim and heroic time. However colourful they may be, the stories of how the poet and his friends were nearly asphyxiated when they fell asleep in a freezing room in which the stove had only just been lit, or of the precious gift of two small carrots, would merely have been incidents



and mine's  
just a lad,  
and a merry one:  
just plan  
and invent  
and try!

The poem was specially timed by Mayakovsky for the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution; but he was convinced that it "will be necessary and will have meaning in 20 and in 40 years' time".

This is also the time at which he demanded that poets should produce "verse tough enough to last a hundred years", with which it might be possible to "speak out and boast to time, to the Republic, to the loved one" (*Our New Year*). It is clear that by "tough verse" he meant a system of poetic devices to convey the ideological and emotional content of the work: composition, imagery, rhythms, and so on.

Mayakovsky's poetic system is most fully represented in his mature work, particularly in *Fine!* It is a complex arsenal of pictorial techniques subordinate to the following principle: "A poem must be politically and ideologically charged to the full. This charge must follow all the latest techniques, by-passing outdated firing possibilities." To Mayakovsky, the basic energy of verse was the organisation of the rhythms.

Mayakovsky's rhythms have not to this day found precise scientific definition. It is possible to speak of them as having certain distinctive features. They do not fit into any scheme of accentual or syllabic-accentual system taken separately. Mayakovsky does not always observe the principle of equal stress on which the accentual system rests; on the other hand, he very often uses syllabic-accentual metres: iambs, trochees, amphibrachs, and others. He draws freely on all the achievements of the classic poets, but subordinates them to living speech cadences on which, as he said himself, most of his works are structured.

Mayakovsky made wide use of the possibilities now available to poetry, of the direct address to the people—at meetings, demonstrations, and in large auditoriums. This accounts for the exceptional prominence given in his verse to the spoken word, to the elucidation and emphasis through intonation of all the shades of meaning and emotion inherent in the spoken word and to the various means of expression essential for rhetorical and living colloquial speech. The spoken word, or verbal complex, knitted together by stress, is in fact a unit of rhythm.

Furthermore, Mayakovsky's rhythms are subjected to extreme compression of thought and feeling, and this does not allow of a single





We call on all  
not to stand aloof,  
but to criticise  
and with scum  
to fight,  
and that alone  
is the very best proof  
of our purity  
and our might.

Mayakovsky's satire is full of fierce conflict. It is always an arena of struggle and is itself an act of struggle. Castigating all that is hostile to socialism, the poet indirectly refers to the heroic courage of Soviet men and women. Behind each negative image, there is a feeling of the clear, positive ideal opposed to it. Take, for example, the satirical poem *The Coward*. The very first quatrain shows that the coward is a monstrous deviant from the type of person prevalent in a society which has accomplished a great revolution and is boldly building a new life: "...Lurking in the shadows, apart, the cowards cringe in a country famed for its courageous ones."

The positive ideal of the satirist is seen in *what* he castigates, and *how*. If what he derides is truly worthy of derision, is an obstruction on the road of social development, and allows of no compromise, the writer can restrict himself to negation. Mayakovsky frequently adopts this approach (see *The Slanderer* and *The Hypocrite*).

Impressive in the variety of its targets, Mayakovsky's satire during the second half of the twenties is notable for wealth of colour, masterly typification, and every imaginable lyrical and epic means of highlighting the image. It seems impossible to name a negative phenomenon which did not come under his microscope. We see in front of our eyes, as on a film strip, a procession of types winkled out by the poet for general scrutiny from their dark crevices and slimy burrows: the new bourgeois, the hooligan, the saboteur, the bureaucrat, the philistine, the toady, the slanderer, and so on.

The principles of satirical typification evolved by Mayakovsky during these years helped him to write *The Bedbug* and *The Bath House*, and with these plays a new chapter began in the history of the satirical theatre and dramatic art in general.

## 8

The distinguishing characteristic of Mayakovsky's talent — a remarkably keen sense of the times — was enriched, beginning with the poem about Lenin, by a precise understanding of the laws of the historical

process. This demands, above all else, historical detail and objectivity. "The basic postulate of Marxism," he declared at a meeting in 1925, "is the analysis of each phenomenon, including literature, in its immediate environment.... Moreover," he added, "it is not the various individual views on this phenomenon that matter, but its objective role in the conditions of its own time."

At the same time, Mayakovsky attaches particular importance to the ability to identify in the present the young shoots of the future and to encourage their growth. "The true poet fans the spark of uncertainty into the flame of clear knowledge" (*On Molchanov Ivan and on Poetry*).

As distinct from the works of the first years of the Revolution, in which the achievement of the communist ideal is usually pushed off into the remote future, Mayakovsky confidently stated in the second half of the twenties: "The commune is a matter of years, not centuries."

The narrowing of the gap between the ideal and the reality exerted a marked influence on Mayakovsky's work and on his aesthetics. In his first post-October works the future, by virtue of its very remoteness, was contrasted with the present. In this, the abstractness of his aesthetic ideal was very much in evidence. But in the works written between 1924 and 1930, the future takes its cue from the present. His aesthetic ideal has acquired realistic definiteness and specificity. "As alive as any living reader" is how he talks to the people of the communist future in *Aloud and Straight*, his amazing prologue to a poem about the Five-Year Plan. This lyrically polemic introduction sums up the difficult and heroic path of the poet of the Revolution, and states in general terms his dearest and most cherished convictions, achieved by dint of self-sacrificing labour and violent literary controversies. The immediate stimulus to write the poem came from the increasing attacks on him by the enemies of political poetry, who were shouting at all the literary cross-roads about his "creative crisis". Mayakovsky's poetry was not only denied the right to a future, it was denied the recognition of his contemporaries.

"I'm a man of decision, I want to talk to posterity myself and not wait for what my critics will tell them in the future"—is how Mayakovsky explained the motives behind the prologue. *Aloud and Straight* is the poet's talking to future generations about the immortality of poetry.

The idea of immortality, as already mentioned, concerned Mayakovsky deeply, and the idea of immortality of verse was particularly dear to him. What gives verse the power to conquer time?

"The poet is an echo of the world, not just his own soul's nanny."<sup>1</sup> Gorky's definition of poetry was close to Mayakovsky's own. It implies breadth of scope in encompassing life's phenomena, a wide range of poetic thought which can record in living images the joys and griefs of more than just one person. For Mayakovsky, the true poet was a general in command of mankind. That is why his address to posterity became a conversation with the whole world. Such a range is typical not only of Mayakovsky's "social" poetry addressed to the "Planet's proletariat", but also of the most "personal" experiences.

*Just look how quiet it is in all the world!  
Night's scattered stars throughout the heavens  
from its purse.  
At hours like this you want to say your word  
to the ages, History and all the Universe.*

But Mayakovsky would not have been the poet we know if his poetic vision had been limited to "ages, History, and all the Universe". The strength of Mayakovsky's poetry lay in its indissoluble ties with each day of his own era. "Of time and myself" was how he defined the theme of *Aloud and Straight*.

In his address to posterity, when he speaks "as alive as any living reader", he expresses the confidence that what has been achieved by him will be worthily assessed by future generations, for only a close tie between the poet and his epoch can make his work survive. Mayakovsky's address to the future is a passionate monologue about the greatness of his own times.

Mayakovsky was convinced that a characteristic feature of this time was self-sacrificing labour and grim, tense struggle — the most majestic and just struggle in history. Work and struggle are what immortalise the epoch. Immortal, too, were the deeds of "inconspicuous" young men, erecting the steel giants of the Five-Year Plan; their names would blaze under Communism on plaques of gold. In his last play, the poet spoke about this through an envoy from the Future. The Soviet people are immortal in their world-historical daring. This is the message of all Mayakovsky's writings after 1917.

When Mayakovsky speaks of immortality, he does not mean the special and exclusive destiny of genius; he means a destiny common to millions of self-sacrificing workers under socialism. And when he exclaims:

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<sup>1</sup> M. Gorky, *Collected Works* in 30 volumes, Russ. Ed., Vol. XXIX, p. 371.

Die,  
                   die, my verse,  
                                   like any rank-and-file,  
 like those of us  
                                   who fought and fell anonymous

he is merely stating, consistently and to the full what he means by immortality. At the same time Mayakovsky was utterly hostile to "the joy of anonymity", to the undervaluing of personality. But he sees the greatness of personality and he sees its immortality as indissolubly bound up with the people.

If man's immortality is in his work, then the poet's verse is his contribution to the treasury of toiling mankind. In his drafts of the second prologue to the poem about the Five-Year Plan, we find a startling image: "the calloused hands of poetry". With these calloused hands, the poet, along with millions of workers, has been building socialism—the greatest monument of the age. That is why he is convinced that such verse, even when buried under mounds of books, will be found and prized by posterity, just as the achievements of the modest toilers who have been battling to build socialism will be valued at their true worth by posterity. No one must be forgotten.

The poet, like the people, is not only a worker, he is a soldier. The whole epoch has demanded that he should become a fighter: "with the clangour of battle it burst into verse". That is why, when speaking of poetry, Mayakovsky often compares it to various forms of weapon. The pen is likened to a bayonet and rhymes to barrels of dynamite. In *Aloud and Straight*, the central position is occupied by the sophisticated and impressive image of "troops armed to the teeth" drawn up on parade before posterity. That is how the poet visualises his verse. In these sophisticated metaphors, we see the already familiar image of the poet as a fighter for the future.

The definition of poetry as a weapon had already been made by Mayakovsky before October. But there is a radical difference in the images used by the poet when comparing verse to a weapon in, say, *Cloud in Pants*, on the one hand, and in *Aloud and Straight*, on the other.

In his pre-revolutionary poems, he often characteristically likens verse to a knife (*About the Various Mayakovskys*), and this is connected with the ideas he held at that time about the forms of struggle against a hostile world, where rebellion and single combat predominated. "Pick up a knife or a bomb," says the poet, addressing "the little hungry ones" in *Cloud in Pants*. "You see, I'm bending down, I'm pulling a knife out of my boot-top," he says, as he threatens god in the same poem. "Antiquary? Show me! I'm buying a

dagger. And it's sweet to feel oneself on the verge of vengeance," says the hero of *Man*, preparing for combat with the Lord of All. These images are integral to the works just quoted.

A sense of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of each separate image to the ideas and spirit of a work is a sign of poetic maturity. This sense also compels the poet to cut lines and stanzas or to write several variants of the same line. The fourth stanza of *Aloud and Straight* originally read as follows:

*I, muck-cleaner and water-carter,  
rebel and blaster acknowledged by all,  
ignore all the orchards and gardens  
of Poetry (wanton old soul!).*

By replacing the line "acknowledged rebel and blaster" with "mobilised and enlisted by the October call-up", he radically changed his conception of the poet, although both definitions are applicable, but one to the earlier, the other to the later Mayakovsky. It is understandable why the image of the rebel and the blaster appeared: the poem looks back over a period of twenty years, and Mayakovsky's thoughts had involuntarily returned to the first stage. To have left the first version as it was would have entailed a corresponding series of images typical of his early work but no longer appropriate to the ideas of the poet which Mayakovsky was affirming in his post-revolutionary writings. In its turn, the expression "mobilised and enlisted by the October call-up", successfully adopted from contemporary political phraseology, creates the image of a poet and soldier of the Revolution, one of the thousands of organised fighters in the great liberation army whose strength is in its political consciousness, its iron discipline, its fearlessness.

This brought in its train a corresponding string of associations: "poetic front", "parade of troops", "muzzles of chapters", "cavalry of witticisms", "lances of rhyme"—a whole arsenal of dangerous weapons.

All these images are joined, like the links of a single chain, by the idea of the Party allegiance. *Aloud and Straight* is one of the most vivid and talented addresses in defence of the Party spirit in poetry. The poem is conceived as a kind of report by a poet-revolutionary to the highest and most demanding authority of all—the Central Control Commission of the communist society:

*Called  
to the CCC  
of Future crimson-starred,*

A page from Mayakovsky's notebook with the poem *Aloud and Straight*.

above the rabble  
of poetic thugs  
and crooks,  
I'll hold up  
like a Party member-card  
all hundred volumes  
of my Party-hearted  
books!

Single-minded devotion to Communism is, as Mayakovsky is convinced, the chief and decisive condition that makes the poet's word in the twentieth century eternally alive, effective, summoning like a tocsin, reverberating like a "mighty music that'll rouse the dead to get up and fight".

Mayakovsky's poetry is a step forward in the artistic development of mankind. It is the poetry of the most progressive revolutionary ideas of our age, the poetry of humanity at its finest. It records the features of the new personality, the new type of poet, the truly heroic features, formed in the self-sacrificing struggle for Communism, in which lies a happy future for mankind.



Soviet literary criticism has to its credit several dozen works which examine Mayakovsky's poetry in its relationship to earlier Russian literature as a whole or to the work of its greatest representatives—Derzhavin, Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Nekrasov, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Gorky, and Blok. Furthermore, the problem has been raised one way or another in countless monographs about the poet's work. And yet the subject has been far from fully clarified, since it is unusually complex and even, in a way, contradictory.

Mayakovsky was one of the greatest innovators in world literature. The opinion has often been expressed that he created his poetry entirely anew, from scratch as it were. Consequently, before discussing specific traditions it has been necessary to ascertain whether there is any form of "traditionalism" in Mayakovsky's work at all. Even the subject "Mayakovsky and Russian Classical Literature" must have very substantial theoretical and literary-historical grounds for its right to existence.

### **Mayakovsky's Precursors**

When one considers the relationship between Mayakovsky's work and Russian literature, the most obvious and undoubted ties are those with the heritage of the 18th century, above all with Derzhavin and also, when it comes to the 19th century, with Nekrasov. Soviet literary research has, of course, thrown considerable light on these ties.

Mayakovsky's kinship with Derzhavin is clearly seen in the nature of their fundamental aesthetic principles (particularly in their unusual "state" aesthetics—preoccupation with the common cause, the transformatory function of the organised whole), in their poetics (mixed styles, oratorical cadences, heavy and sometimes cacophonous instrumentation, and so on) and in the "lyrical hero" himself (for example, the sense of oneself as the small part of a vast social entity, and also the introduction into poetry of minute details from everyday life). Equally obvious is Mayakovsky's link with Nekrasov. The first study, entitled "Nekrasov and Mayakovsky", appeared as early as 1921, and the subject has been raised more than once since then in Soviet literary scholarship.

In 1922, I. N. Rozanov, an authority on the history of Russian poetry, published a work which was interesting, but controversial and, in many respects, superficial from the theoretical angle. The author pointed to undoubted "echoes" among three poets, Derzhavin, Nekrasov, and Mayakovsky. This work was based on an oversimplified and excessively schematic "theory of literary continuity". Consequently, the author's general train of reasoning, his theoretical basis, was below criticism. But Rozanov "intuitively" grasped certain very real recurrences in the development of Russian poetry.

I particularly have in mind the poetic continuity he noted, which runs from Derzhavin through Nekrasov to Mayakovsky. Rozanov contrasts poets "of the Pushkin type" with these three and claims that the first had "more calm, poise and self-possession"—the "coldness of inspiration"; while Derzhavin, Nekrasov and Mayakovsky introduced more of their own personal temperament: and so it would seem that they composed "in excitement and in haste".... The first are the more "exacting artists"—the prosaic is rare with them and always strictly considered. They are likely to allow a certain flabbiness and paleness rather than lack of taste. The second are much more adventurous: they do not fear any lack of taste, they are not afraid of shocking anyone. Derzhavin's line "She's looking for lice in my hair" inserted into an ode, was no less outrageous than the title of Mayakovsky's triptych *Cloud in Pants*. The mixing of styles was a favourite practice of these poets. They do not discreetly introduce the prosaic here and there, but use it freely and copiously....

The phonetics of the two groups are also entirely different. The first is notable for a highly wrought poetic style, for instrumentation based on melody and mellifluousness.... The style of the second group is disjointed: there are more unduly long lines and metrical dislocations.... Derzhavin's instrumentation, in Pushkin's opinion, "is bound to madden any discriminating ear". But Nekrasov and the Futurists are akin to Derzhavin. According to Gumilev, Nekrasov had "remarkable phonetics, carrying on Derzhavin's tradition over Pushkin's head". Rozanov has, of course, merely touched on the theme in these notes. But it has been investigated more deeply and extensively in a whole series of subsequent studies. Particularly worth noticing, for instance, is Yuri Tynyanov's subtle evaluation: "Mayakovsky is akin to Derzhavin.... Like Derzhavin, he knew that the secret of the majestic image was not in 'sublimity', but in extremes of associated planes—the high and the low—in what the 18th century used to term 'the juxtaposition of unequally lofty words' and 'the conjunction of somewhat remote ideas'.

"His public-meeting, shouted verse, intended for open-air acoustics (just as Derzhavin's verse was composed with a view to reverberation in the palace halls) ... engendered a special system of poetic communication.... Mayakovsky's verse is always on the knife edge between the comic and the tragic."<sup>1</sup>

The affinity between Derzhavin and Mayakovsky (and between them and Nekrasov) is not a coincidence. Tynyanov, despite his penchant for the "immanent" history of literature, finds it necessary to

<sup>1</sup> Yuri Tynyanov, *Archaists and Innovators*, Russ. Ed., Leningrad, 1929, p. 553.



Pushkin gave his own opinion of Derzhavin's poetry in a letter to Delvig: "...I have been rereading the whole of Derzhavin, and here is my final opinion. This crank knew neither Russian grammar nor the spirit of the Russian language (which is why he is inferior to Lomonosov). He had no conception of style or harmony.... That is why he is bound to madden any discriminating ear ... what he does have is *truly poetic thoughts, pictures and movement*, as you read him, you think you are reading the translation of some marvellous original.... About eight of Derzhavin's odes and a few extracts ought to be preserved; the rest should be burnt."<sup>1</sup>

Two decades later, Derzhavin's poetry was to be summed up by Gogol, founder of the new literary era in which Nekrasov's poetry was to take shape:

"The mind boggles, wondering where he came by this hyperbolic sweep of language.... Sometimes, from god knows how far away, he gets hold of words and expressions precisely in order to draw nearer to his subject. Everything is wild and huge; but as soon as he is helped by the force of inspiration, the whole of that cumbrousness serves to animate the subject with unnatural force, so that he seems to be looking with a thousand eyes. It's worth glancing through his *The Waterfall*, in which whole epoch seems to have fused into a single soaring ode. In *The Waterfall*, other poets are as pygmies before him.... Compared with other poets, everything with him looks gigantic: his poetic images, since they have no plastic finish, seem lost in a kind of soulful fuzziness of outline and consequently acquire even more majesty.... Everything with him is on the grand scale. His style is grand, like that of no other poet among us. On dissecting it with the anatomical knife, you see that this results from an unusual combination of the loftiest words with the most base and simple ones, and no one but Derzhavin would have had the temerity for this."<sup>2</sup>

This assessment of Gogol's discloses the very features of Derzhavin's poetry which—in essentially different form, of course,—are also prominent in Mayakovsky's poetry. But to return to our hypothetical disagreement between Pushkin and Gogol.

The obvious and sharp disparity between the opinions of Pushkin and Gogol, whose literary judgements so often coincided, is entirely legitimate. A new literary era had begun. This was demonstrated, in particular, by the unprecedented success which came at the end of the

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is as elusive as lightning and as luxuriant as nature." (A. A. Bestuzhev, *Collected Poems*, Leningrad, 1948, p. 167.)

<sup>1</sup> *Pushkin as Critic*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1950, pp. 94-95.

<sup>2</sup> *N. V. Gogol on Literature*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1952, pp. 170-71.



*Without use, without beauty, since what times have you  
been glorious?*

*Are you god's creation or the devil's joke?*

*Say, accursed one, why were you created?*<sup>1</sup>

Pushkin wrote about this poem to Katenin: "It only needs the penultimate line to stir up the whole Censorship Committee against your sonnet." "I have had news about the witless pusillanimity of the censors..." replied Katenin, "but as for the sonnet ... *mon vers subsiste*, and I consider it one of my best, precisely because of its humorous energy."<sup>2</sup>

This poem saw the light in 1940 (!). But Katenin was right: his verse existed. For it continued a definite line of Russian poetry which was developing uninterruptedly, and, of course, not only in Katenin's work.

The following judgement by Eichenbaum, the literary historian, is therefore profoundly significant: "Nekrasov ... had to ... jump to one side or even back—to Derzhavin and Krylov, in the sense in which they ... revivify poetic diction with common and sometimes vulgar speech.... In making the ode satirical, Derzhavin was obeying the same law which guided Nekrasov when he changed the ballad into a satire or the long poem into a skit...." On the other hand, Nekrasov's work "carries on the tradition of 'high-flown' poetry in the style of the ode ... of Derzhavin.... Instead of the usual verse genres and forms, there is something midway between the ode ... and the skit: Derzhavin transferred from the 18th to the 19th century—from the satirical journals of the time into the atmosphere of Russian journalism in the fifties and sixties"<sup>3</sup>.

Eichenbaum's assessment is based on a formalist interpretation of the literary process, and only his outstanding talent as a research scholar enabled him to see the real link between Nekrasov and Derzhavin. It is worth pointing out that Eichenbaum himself probably did not notice that he is primarily concerned with traditions of *content* (which, it is true, are inconceivable without traditions of "form", without fixed system of prosody).

According to Eichenbaum, what links Nekrasov's poetry with that of Derzhavin is a "high-flown" rhetorical principle in the style of the ode, a satirical message, and a bias towards common speech, all fused into

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<sup>1</sup> Literal translation.—Tr.

<sup>2</sup> P. A. Katenin, *Poems*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1954, pp. 310, 311.

<sup>3</sup> B. M. Eichenbaum, *Through Literature*, Russ. Ed., Leningrad, 1924, pp. 241, 243, 247.

one. But, emerging in organic synthesis, these elements signify not only definiteness of form, but definiteness of *content*. The "satirical ode", absorbing the speech of the common people, is not only a stylistic, but a thematic and "ideological" characteristic as well, especially if one bears in mind the specific historical circumstances. Only the content, only the message of Nekrasov's poetry could have engendered such a "form" in the 40s-60s. Poets with another message, such as Fet and Maikov, were creating entirely different forms at that time.

In elaborating his idea, Eichenbaum involuntarily arrives straight at content, and even at the problem of "poetry and life", when he writes: "Nekrasov is ironical in his treatment of the old, worn-out image of the poet-prophet. He makes the 'mob' a co-participant in his creative work and moves away from the traditional theme of 'the poet and the rabble': 'I am of your flesh and blood, frenzied crowd!'"<sup>1</sup>

This is probably an exaggeration. Nekrasov merely took a decisive step towards making the masses "a participant in creative work". And it was a step straight towards Mayakovsky.

In 1922, speaking of Mayakovsky's latest works, Lunacharsky testified: "Mayakovsky has of late rather proudly been calling himself a Nekrasovite.... His poetry is becoming more and more permeated with original, vigorous and intensive publicism.... Nekrasov the satirist, Nekrasov the painter of the city is undoubtedly somewhere on the rising line from these works of Mayakovsky."<sup>2</sup>

The characteristics that link Mayakovsky with Nekrasov are vigorous publicism in a poetry which blends satire and the ode, and in which there is a harsh intrusion of common speech into the poetic verbal element. And in Nekrasov's lines, "I am of your flesh and blood, frenzied crowd!", it is impossible not to sense a kinship with the cadences of Mayakovsky's own poetry.

If one tries to find the shortest possible term for one of the basic strata in the poetry of Derzhavin, Nekrasov, and Mayakovsky, it would be "satirical ode". In none, or almost none, of the poets who emerged in the post-Nekrasov era, do we find this form so charged with content or such a genre (in the broad sense of the word). It is not in Nadson, or Annensky, or Bunin, or Sasha Cherny; Blok hardly has it at all. It is only characteristic to some degree of Andrei Bely's poetry, which, in a way, is akin to Nekrasov's.

It is important to appreciate the profound originality of this genre component. When Mayakovsky was writing his *Satirikon* verses

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 244-45.

<sup>2</sup> See: Ya. E. Shapirshtein-Lers, *The Social Significance of Russian Literary Futurism*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1922, p. 3.

— *Hymn to a Judge, Hymn to a Scholar*, etc., these were not “satirical hymns” in the full sense of the word, for word “hymn” here calls for inverted commas. But satirical ode in the specific sense implies a synthesis of satire and ode without inverted commas. This is seen, for example, in the title *Mystery-Bouffe* (indicating a genre rather than the theme of the work), in which both words are undoubtedly used without inverted commas.

Derzhavin says in his *Memorial*:

...I was the first who dared in diverting Russian  
style  
To proclaim the virtues of Felitsa....<sup>1</sup>

Other poets “proclaimed” these virtues in serious, heroic style.

A remarkable and almost inspired example of the “satirical ode” is Derzhavin’s *On Happiness*.

The comic design of the work, so far from narrowing its scope, gives it universal application. The ode *On Happiness* is virtually a kind of world carnival. The theme of personal happiness merges inseparably with the world theme. As we read how politics, justice, intellect, conscience and logic “hold banquets” and “stake the age on cards”, we are reminded that this ode was written in the year of the Great French Revolution....

The satirical ode is developed in an original way by Nekrasov. True, the genre component in Nekrasov’s poetry is often complicated by an elegiac principle; the rare genre of the *satirical elegy* is typical of Nekrasov. But strains of the ode are also discernible in the complex melody.

Here, for example, is a well-known quatrain by Nekrasov:

*We wished our people to be free,  
For this we lost our liberty.  
We served the noblest of ideals  
And finished up in prison cells.<sup>2</sup>*

Satirical bite is inseparable here from an elegiac strain but these lines also have an underlying element of the ode, since Nekrasov is exalting those who, in spite of their inescapable and distressing fate, continue to want freedom for the people and to strive for the good....

Definite elegiac strains are integral not only to Nekrasov’s poetry but—although this is very rarely mentioned—to Mayakovsky’s as well.

<sup>1</sup> Literal translation. *Felitsa*—Catherine II.—*Tr.*

<sup>2</sup> Translated by Dorian Rottenberg.—*Ed.*



There also is a markedly elegiac note in *Jubilee* and *Homeward Bound!* (the last "excessively elegiac" stanza of this poem was, as is known, cut by the poet); in its pure form, the satirical elegy is represented by the poem *Shallow Philosophy in Deep Waters*.

It may be supposed that the blending of satire and ode automatically engenders elegiac motifs as an aesthetic by-product, so to speak. This results from reflection on the contradictoriness and, in certain respects, disharmony of life, which simultaneously demand ode and satire.

This complex genre component underlies the verse of Derzhavin, Nekrasov, Mayakovsky, and poets of their kind.

It may be objected that Nekrasov's poetry does not fit into this category. A great many of his works which treat of peasant themes and which are closely connected with folk-lore and with the particular poetic vein opened up by Koltsov, do, indeed have a different basis. Nekrasov's work consists of two essentially different strata. This was what Lunacharsky had in mind when he wrote that Mayakovsky followed Nekrasov the satirist and painter of city life.

The second, "peasant folk-lore", element in Nekrasov's verse was continued in the 20th century by poets—Yesenin above all—who were, in their way, the diametrical opposites of Mayakovsky. But this cannot obscure the other Nekrasov tradition. It should be noted that in Derzhavin's poetry there is, apart from the element of the satirical ode, an inherently different line—the "anacreontic lyrics", in which he emerges as a precursor of Batyushkov, Davydov, Delvig and—to go even further—Fet, Maikov, and Polonsky, but certainly not Nekrasov.

What concerns us at present is the poetic trend which led directly to Mayakovsky. To trace it, we must investigate in detail the complex ramifications in the development of Russian poetry. This is essential, otherwise we shall fail to see clearly the profound inevitability of Mayakovsky's work, its "rootedness" in Russian poetic tradition.

Mayakovsky's work is, of course, wider and more varied in scope than the genre component outlined above. When speaking of traditions, we are generally inclined to forget sometimes that this does not mean the poet's actual work, but the *traditions*, the roots going down into the preceding poetry. If we study Mayakovsky's work as a complete whole, we cannot reduce it to any one particular line, or even generally to the literature before it if only because Mayakovsky was one of the most decisive of poetic reformers.

Two essentially different things must be clearly distinguished: the integral actuality of Mayakovsky's work and the sources of his poetry, the artistic element of the preceding literature from which he primarily originated.

I think that the decisive role in Mayakovsky's *growth to maturity* was played by the trend in Russian poetry which is represented above all by Derzhavin and Nekrasov. But when we examine Mayakovsky's poetry, not from the viewpoint of its roots and sources, but as a complete totality, it is, of course, impossible to restrict oneself to this aspect (this also applies, incidentally, to the analysis of Nekrasov's poetry).

Mayakovsky's heritage is related not only to this line, but to the poetry of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Blok. It is no accident that time and again the images and voices of these poets are woven into Mayakovsky's own poetry. Our literary scholars have said a great deal about the relationship between the work of these poets and that of Mayakovsky. This is entirely appropriate and legitimate. But I consider it essential to distinguish between *traditions* in the special, narrow sense of the word, and certain features *common* to Russian poetry as a whole. In Mayakovsky's work, one may point to traits and qualities of Pushkin, Lermontov and Blok. But it was from these very qualities that Mayakovsky "sprang" in the course of his growth to maturity as a poet.

It is typical that Mayakovsky should have very frequently *parodied* these poets, "retailoring" their styles, diction and rhythms. Consequently, when we talk about tradition in the strict sense of the word, we naturally turn to the Derzhavin-Nekrasov line, which Mayakovsky adopted "directly", without revivifying it through parody.

This does not mean, however, that Mayakovsky rejected Pushkin, Lermontov, and Blok. In reinterpreted and transmuted form, the heritage of these poets echoed vividly and powerfully in Mayakovsky's own work.

But there is neither point nor justification in seeking parallels and coincidences (as is so often done). Such parallels are appropriate to some degree only in comparing Mayakovsky with Derzhavin and Nekrasov. For here we have not simply common factors and echoes, but direct continuity and continuation.

### Mayakovsky's Slogan "Art Into Life" and the Traditions of Russian Literature

A very significant note made in 1924 has been preserved among Mayakovsky's papers:

"After the great realists, Nekrasov and Dostoyevsky, Petersburg declined, fell silent, became reactionary in literature....

"600 verst away (i. e. in Moscow.— V. K.) there beats creative life which knows no equal in Europe....

"In what is the main (tendency)....

"The transference of work from art into life.

"This slogan unites the masses."

This was during the period when Mayakovsky delivered an address "Down with Art and Up with Life", in which he said, amongst other things: "'Artistic creation' is acknowledged to be necessary work ... as the production of words that improve and organise our activity in life.... Art should link up closely with life (as an intensive function of the latter). Either link up with it, or perish."

It has already been mentioned that Nekrasov strove to make the masses the "co-participant of his creative work". But with Nekrasov, this was only a striving, a desire. For Mayakovsky, however, it became a feasible, practical, and all-defining principle. He wrote of the creative process: "You must always bear in mind the audience to whom poem is addressed.... The main medium of contact with the masses is the concert-hall stage, the living voice, live speech."

Many similar statements by Mayakovsky could be quoted here. But they are widely known in any case, and what matters is not the poet's own rule, but that it became the very fabric of his verse. This is demonstrated in one of the most valuable studies of Mayakovsky's poetry—G. O. Vinokur's book *Mayakovsky as an Innovator of Language*.

"The first and most common stylistic feature of Mayakovsky's diction is that it is wholly permeated by the element of the *spoken* and, moreover, the predominantly *loud* spoken word,"<sup>1</sup> writes Vinokur; and he shows in detail how this quality determines Mayakovsky's speech structure and rhythms, his phraseology, his choice of words, and the phonic originality of his verse. "A form of speech in which, as it were, direct contact with the listener is expressed," writes Vinokur, "is Mayakovsky's most usual method, whether he is stating a personal and intimate theme or whether he is formulating some universally significant proposition.... It is interesting to compare, for instance, the objectively affirmative tone of Pushkin's *Monument* and the inevitable address to the listener ... with which Mayakovsky's own *Monument* begins."<sup>2</sup>

It would, of course, be wrong to think that there had been no form of lyrical address before Mayakovsky's poetry, and especially Nekrasov's. It is only with Mayakovsky, however, that the address to the reader becomes a dominant feature of the style, and only with Mayakovsky does this address seem to demand an immediate reaction, a vocal response, urge, and action.

<sup>1</sup> G. Vinokur, *Mayakovsky as an Innovator of Language*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1943, p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 118-19.

This quality may be interpreted in two ways: as a definition of the nature of *verse* itself, and in the literal sense that a poet's work should actually evoke a definite response or move from the listener. This interpretation was often put forward in LEF criticism and particularly in Mayakovsky's own statements. The idea of "art into life", expressed in the quotation above, thus acquires an entirely practical and literal meaning.

It is often considered that Mayakovsky held this idea in theory only and that it had little or no influence on his work. The purpose of this hypothesis is to "whitewash" the poet, to deliver him from the charge of vulgar utilitarianism. But a very prominent place is given in Mayakovsky's work to the direct and open *agitkas*, intended to persuade the recipient to say or do something quite definite (such as sign for a state loan, only drink boiled water, persuade others to take a specific course of action, etc., etc.) and even to advertisements for some shop or other.

Many of the poet's contemporaries sharply criticised this aspect of his creative activity. Numerous statements can be quoted in which Mayakovsky was seen as having "ruined" himself by frittering away his talent on artistically insignificant utilitarian verse. The critics of the time went out of their way to demonstrate the *poetic* worthlessness of Mayakovsky's *agitkas*.

They were mostly wasting their time, since the poet himself was well aware that his agitation verses were of primarily utilitarian, purely practical and not particularly aesthetic value and that they were called to change and transform the life of the times in a practical way, not to enter the golden treasury of poetry. And this should not be glossed over. To charges of "artistic worthlessness", the poet replied: "I'm glad: I didn't want to be artistic, I was trying to do things unartistically."

This does not mean that Mayakovsky carried his work in general beyond the limits of art; he simply considered that the old art with its aesthetic principles was not needed any more. He was the first to obtain the opportunity not only of writing verse, but of directly addressing and influencing the masses who were creating history. Consequently, he was able, and was under obligation, to put his poetry at the service of all the people creating a new world. And each of his works was now called upon not simply to express something, but to perform a specific social function, as he mentions in a well-known example from the article: *How Is Verse to Be Made?*: "Social demand — song lyrics for Red Army Soldiers off to the Petrograd front. Target — to smash Yudenich...."

This argument is sometimes taken ironically. But let us look into it a little more closely. Is it not natural to recall here the heroic Tyrtaeus

who "gave words for songs" to the Spartans going out to battle with the rebellious Messenians? Did not the lines of this ancient Greek poet have just the same target?

When Mayakovsky's aesthetics are evaluated in the light of this enormous historical perspective, wholly understandable and magnificent indeed is his admission that his "favourite lines" were the couplet with which the "sailors stormed the Winter Palace". In his work, Mayakovsky resurrected in an organic and natural way the "status" of poetry which had been characteristic of antiquity.

Let us return to Russian 19th-century poetry. Lermontov says with bitterness how the poet has "lost his function", how he has become like a dagger turned into an ornament, "inglorious and innocuous".

Almost at the same time as Lermontov, Baratynsky was writing *Rhyme*, a poem of real genius on this theme, disclosing the tragedy of the poet deprived of a "forum". It sees as a "golden age" the time when for the poet "full faith in compassion lived" and when he "lorded it over the will of the people" with the power of words. But now the poet looks into himself: he is both the judge and the accused. He does not know whether his inspiration is "a laughable sickness or a higher gift". He cannot solve this problem. Only rhyme, only this harmony which seems to come from the external world—or at least from the objectivity of language—responds to the poet and, as it were, confirms and recognises his dreams.

This theme of the tragedy of creativeness, so clearly formulated by Baratynsky and Lermontov, was also expressed later by Nekrasov.

As we can see, this is a constant theme in Russian 19th-century poetry. But what form did it take for Mayakovsky?

In 1923, the newspapers were reporting protest meetings against the murder of Vorovsky and the Curzon ultimatum:

"The huge, interminable Mayakovsky, shouting from the balcony of the Freedom statue in all the copper sonority of his voice:

'On the march, wheel....  
Left!'

And thousands of voices below roaring: 'Left!'"<sup>1</sup>

"In a strong, powerful voice that rang all over the square, he read his poem *The Commune Shall Not Be under the Entente*.

"The whole square repeated after him: 'The Commune shall not be under the Entente! Left, left, left!'" (*Rabochaya gazeta*, May 13, 1923)<sup>2</sup>.

Here the rhyme comes back to the poet in the voices of thousands,

<sup>1</sup> *Pravda*, May 13, 1923.

<sup>2</sup> From V. Katanyan's book *Mayakovsky: A Literary Chronicle*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1957, p. 188.

and the people acknowledge the poet's "dreams" and take up the refrain. Lermontov dreamed of times long since past when the poet's verse rang out like a bell. There is a description in one of the newspapers of a recital by Mayakovsky at "The Poets' Café" in December 1917:

"The café was packed with sailors, Red Army men, and workers. They were all standing. Mayakovsky's declamation rang from the stage like a Kremlin bell. That they could hold their breath ... gulp down clods of words, and that the bursts of applause should swell into the delighted roar of Roman legions hailing their tribune—this was so unlike anything that had ever happened before and was an impressive example of how it was possible for the audience and the poet to merge into a single menacing whole."<sup>1</sup>

Everything in this highly emotional account has, of course, been romanticised: legions hailing the tribune are from a history book, not from life. Even so, Mayakovsky's activity had become the reality dreamed of by the 19th-century poets. He now had staggering opportunities, and he rushed to meet them, hurling aside everything that could stand in his way. In 1930, he wrote: "The work of the revolutionary poet does not end with books. Speeches at meetings, *chastushki* for the front, one-day *agitkas*, the voice over the radio and the slogan glimpsed on the side of the tram—all are equal and sometimes extremely valuable instances of poetry."

Mayakovsky was right—at least where he himself was concerned. And yet it was all far from being so simple. Lermontov, and Baratynsky, and Nekrasov also, to some extent, worked in solitude, without reactions, and saw this as tragic. Mayakovsky spoke directly to the masses, he gave song lyrics to those who stormed the Winter Palace, his voice rang out like a bell on a tower. It would be only too easy to say that he found harmony and happiness. But this is what he wrote: "I'd trample, myself to quell, on the very throat of my verse." We must not oversimplify. Why, indeed, did such an enormous talent have to give up so much energy to the one-day *agitka*, the poster, and even to advertising? Couldn't all this have been done by less gifted writers of verse? Mayakovsky could then have spent the time on more lyrical tragedies and epics, inimitable satirical odes, and ironic elegies such as *Shallow Philosophy in Deep Waters*. He was encouraged to do so by many, friends and foes alike. But he went his own way nevertheless.

In Mikhail Prishvin's diaries there is a remarkable entry: *The Truth of Mayakovsky*:

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

"Am reading Mayakovsky non-stop. I don't consider that poetry is what matters most in his poems. What matters most is what I write about every day, so that the day can be pinned down on paper. Posterity, perhaps, will swear, but the job has been done and the day pinned down. And what has been pinned down is the truth which, as it turned out, Mayakovsky served....

"Mayakovsky simply obliterated the dividing line between dialogue and verse."<sup>1</sup>

Let us elaborate this idea further. The poet also erased the boundary line between poetry and life in its day-to-day political content. When he found the opportunity to participate directly in the Revolution, his activity went beyond the bounds of poetry, beyond the framework of art in the special sense. And this was a necessity for him. How could he remain within the confines of poetry in the traditional sense of the word, when "the whole horizon of the commune" had been revealed to his inner vision and when the word "proletariat" reverberated like a mighty music which could raise up the dead to battle?

In one of his last speeches (March 25, 1930), Mayakovsky spoke of "practical application of poetry in factory production": "I understand (this) work as aimed at the fulfilment of the slogan—do not put your hands inside the machinery, and as aimed at the adoption of measures so that the worker should not be smashed by electric current... I make this appeal with my pen, with my rhymes, and it is no less important than the most inspired themes...."

For taking this standpoint, Mayakovsky was subjected to countless and varied attacks which can be summed up as a protest against the rejection of poetry and against the break with genuine art—especially with the traditions of classical Russian literature.

His assessment of the great works of Russian literature would seem to rule out any idea of continuing its traditions. After all, Mayakovsky wrote in 1927: "...An article by a workers' correspondent and *Yevgeni Onegin* are equal in literary terms, and ... today's slogan is superior to yesterday's *War and Peace*...." It was Mayakovsky who affirmed in 1928: "The reading matter for the Soviet masses is not going to be the classics," and he sympathetically recalled the words of a Komsomol boy who "returned *War and Peace* because he was bored with it: 'You can only read this kind of thing lounging on a divan.'"

"Not only in content, in turns of speech, but in the very form, in the approach to literary work, there is no need to take the works of L. N. Tolstoy as a model.... And, of course, we shall find more that is new in all the hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of despat-

<sup>1</sup> M. M. Prishvin, *Collected Works* in 6 volumes, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1958, Vol. V, pp. 414, 416.

ches by the workers' correspondents, despite the lack of style and polish...."

These affirmations sound like extreme nihilism towards works of the highest artistic merit. Incidentally, Mayakovsky had a predecessor here. "We must give spiritual food to the people," he wrote. "With what we shall satisfy their artistic needs? Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, L. Tolstoy, pictures of nude women in the French salon or painted by our own artists?... None of these is, or can be, of any use....

"This ... is food, but it is the kind which is no use except to us, who are already fattened up; it bloats but does not nourish, and the people also turn away from it when we offer it to them....

"...But why, it would seem, should those engaged in the arts not serve the people?... Tell the painter to work without a studio, models, costumes and to paint a five-kopek picture; he will say that this means to reject art, as he understands it.... Tell the poet or writer to give up his poems and novels and write songs, histories, and fairy-tales comprehensible to the illiterate; he will tell you that you are mad. But is it not a worse madness that artists ... have forgotten how to make ... food suitable for the people, and yet they regard this ... as a virtue on their part?...

"It is time to realise that if you wish to serve people, then work for ... the working people and keep them in mind when you are writing...."

It is quite obvious that this critic is saying approximately the same as Mayakovsky, but is putting it more sharply, if anything. Affirming that *Yevgeni Onegin* and *War and Peace* are neither needed by the people, nor of any use to them, he proposes painting "five-kopek" pictures, and writing "songs, histories, and fairy-tales" needed by all and comprehensible to all....

And these subversive proposals come from Lev Tolstoy, the author of *War and Peace*.<sup>1</sup>

No, Tolstoy could not remain within the confines of art either. One of the greatest writers mankind has ever known, he publicly renounced his own creative work and declared that "the activity which is called artistic, and to which I have formerly given all my powers, has not only lost the importance I once attributed to it, but has become positively unpleasant to me....

"...It has become clear that this—novels, poetry and music—is not art, in the sense of something important and necessary to man, but the self-indulgence of robbers and parasites who have nothing in common

<sup>1</sup> From the book *L. N. Tolstoy on Literature*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1955, pp. 177, 194, 201, 603.



with life; novels and stories about people falling vilely in love, poetry about the same thing or about being bored stiff.... But life, the whole of life, teems with its own questions about food, accommodation and work, about faith, about human relations.... One feels ashamed and disgusted."<sup>1</sup>

*Whoever cares  
that "Ah, poor creature,  
how he loved, how his heart did bleed!"*  
.....

*Hark!  
Locomotives groan,  
draughts  
through their floors and windows blow:  
"Give more coal from Don,  
mechanics,  
fitters  
for the depot!"*  
.....

*Comrades,  
wake up,  
give us new art  
to haul the Republic out of the mud!*

Thus wrote Mayakovsky in verse; and in prose:

"Let the lyricists remember the ditties to the strains of which they fell in love. We are also glad to remember the lines to which Denikin fled from Orel." "A poet is not someone who trots about like a curly-haired lamb and bleats on lyrical love themes, but a poet is someone who ... is not disgusted by any theme about the Revolution and about building up the national economy, and who writes *agitkas* on any problem of administration."

It can quite rightly be said that Tolstoy also devoted several decades to the creation of unique *agitkas*—"popular tales", proverbs, artistic propaganda, moral homilies, and the *ABC*, about which he said: "I have been praised for everything I have written, but about the one truly good and useful thing I have done, the *ABC*, and these ("popular"—V. K.) books, not a single unabusive word has been printed in the press."<sup>2</sup>

Yes, Tolstoy was subjected to as many attacks as Mayakovsky for his "agitatory" work, and they were of the same character.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 271, 311-12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

Cover of Mayakovsky's book *On Poetry*, designed by A. G. Tyshler (1939).



Tolstoy's "agitation", needless to say, was not like Mayakovsky's in content and aims. But surely a profound affinity is evident in their artistic standpoints, even if only in their rejection of art in the traditional sense for the sake of "practical" and utilitarian aesthetics. Tolstoy passionately strove for his work to play a real part in the life of the people, and help them to solve in a practical way the problems of "food, accommodation, work, faith, and human relations". He strove to obliterate the boundary-line between art and the life of the people, and that is why he wrote his proverbs and sermons, published and propagated the peasants' stories (his version of workers' correspondents!), reacted to all events, and, finally, himself followed behind the plough.... And it might be noted that Tolstoy also stepped on the throat

of his own verse and frequently admitted that he wrote "fiction", as it were, in secret, *despite himself*....

Tolstoy's standpoint was, of course, bound up with his "Tolstoyanism". But it also had a deeper and more general content. There is no avoiding the fact that Tolstoy continued the time-honoured traditions of Russian literature, in which the boundaries between art and life had been transgressed so often and so violently, the one merging into the other. Consider *The Lay of Igor's Host*—that appeal, that "agitation" for unity among the Russian princes. Consider the indivisibility of life and art in Avvakum, Lomonosov, Radishchev, and Herzen.... Tolstoy's standpoint, if considered in depth, is a link in that chain.

Mayakovsky's standpoint, which also belongs to this chain, is, of course, unique, for Mayakovsky was a poet of the Revolution. His poetry really went out on to the public squares and did not merely aspire to do so. But the activity of the poet must also be understood as the continuation of tradition, as the legitimate development of certain attributes of Russian literature.

During the revolutionary era, these attributes could be brought out on an unprecedented scale. Mayakovsky wanted to speak directly to millions of people who were re-making life. And not only to speak to them, but to obtain a direct answer in word and deed. His poetry strove to become a dialogue with the millions, a conversation with them loud enough for the whole world to hear. This conversation could not be fitted into the ordinary frame-work and forms of literature.

Nor should it be thought that it was solely a matter of *agitka*. It can only be said that in his directly agitational verse, Mayakovsky's main purpose was expressed more sharply, more starkly, more obviously. And so the *agitkas* are the "point of departure" from which it is advantageous to proceed in investigating the fundamental preconditions of Mayakovsky's creative art and in analysing the problem of "the poetry of Mayakovsky and life". But, of course, the heritage of the man who wrote *It* and *Aloud and Straight* cannot be reduced to *agitkas*.

Only by realising the profound essence of Mayakovsky's poetry is it possible to understand and evaluate his work. It is no use approaching him with the usual criteria. But if he is judged by the special laws of his own creativeness, then, even without sharing any of his views, prejudices, and tastes as a poet, it is impossible to remain unimpressed by his scope, his achievement, his tremendous personality, his amazing career.

On the other hand, his poetry was clearly a continuation and development of the most fundamental traditions of Russian literature. The aesthetic element of his poetry, taken as a unity of content and

form, is above all organically bound up with one of the decisive lines of Russian poetry—that of Derzhavin and Nekrasov.

On the other hand, if we look at Mayakovsky from the viewpoint of the “art and life” problem, then here, too, his revolutionary innovations rest on the tradition so vividly expressed in the work of Avvakum, Lomonosov, Herzen, and Tolstoy.

And when one speaks of the problem of “Mayakovsky and Russian literature”, it must be realised that its solution must lead not only to a deeper understanding of his work, but must clarify much in the history of Russian literature, for Mayakovsky’s work embodied certain of its radical features in concentrated, harsher, and starker form.

In December 1953, The Moscow Theatre of Satire staged *The Bath House* by Vladimir Mayakovsky.

This performance was the climax to a whole period in the life of the theatre. A new frontier had been reached in the development of Soviet satire. For its work on Mayakovsky's plays, the Theatre of Satire was awarded first prize in 1957 by the adjudicators of the All-Union Festival of Drama Theatres.

Mayakovsky, that giant of a poet and an artist, radically transformed the creative life of our stage. Since then, he has been with us every day of our lives. He has become our conscience, our counsellor and the aesthetic criterion with which we now verify our every step in art. From him we learn principles and high standards, creative activeness, audacity, hatred of any "scum", wherever they may be lurking, and an indestructibly fervent love of our own Soviet life. At the same time, we are well aware that the productions we have created are far from perfect, although they have won public recognition. So far from exhausting the possibilities, we are in many cases still only standing on the threshold of Mayakovsky's militant, philosophical, spectacular, and amazingly profound drama.

This is understandable, since we were among the first to risk attempting Mayakovsky after the twenty-five-year "conspiracy of silence" that formed round his dramatic works. The failure of *The Bath House* just before his death in 1930 decisively removed Mayakovsky's plays from the Soviet theatrical repertory and created the deep-rooted legend that they were not good theatre. This legend was willingly supported and boosted by the poet's enemies many of whom had been victims of Mayakovsky's satire in their time.

First, they said that Mayakovsky's plays were hopelessly out-of-date in content and should be relegated to the archives; that *The Bedbug*, for example, was meaningless outside the atmosphere of the New Economic Policy.

Secondly, they said that the form of Mayakovsky's dramas was archaic, that his images were schematic and more suitable for poster art, and that there were no real living human beings in his plays.

Thirdly, they said that the methods of the contemporary theatre, the laws of socialist realism and the principles of the Stanislavsky school could not accommodate Mayakovsky's dramas and were inapplicable to them.

But the time came when Mayakovsky's literary adversaries gave ground and recognised the poetic heritage of this remarkable poet because he was acknowledged by the people themselves. As for his dramatic works, they were, for a long time, the only argument against Mayakovsky and were considered proof that his art was far removed from the demands of the people. This was not said openly; but silence



Mayakovsky with D. D. Shostakovich, V. E. Meyerhold  
and A. M. Rodchenko (1928).

is also a form of attack. By the beginning of the fifties, Mayakovsky's plays had been well and truly forgotten, and only in specialised research works were they given their due along with the unproduced film scenarios, the rough drafts and the literary notes.

It is easy to imagine the excitement that reigned in the theatre and what we actors and directors went through in the days leading up to the première of *The Bath House*. We were well aware that we were risking a flop: this would mean burying Mayakovsky as a playwright for many long years to come and confirming the claim that his plays were not good theatre. True, we had our predecessors. *The Bath House* had been performed over the radio in Ruben Simonov's production with Igor Ilyinsky in the leading part. The Pskov Drama Theatre "risked" performing it, and although rumours about the show were encouraging, this did not mean that the problem had been solved. They were waiting to see how Mayakovsky's satire would come over in the Theatre of Satire. I repeat, we were terribly worried. But we risked it just the same. We could no longer reconcile ourselves to the idea that the people should be deprived of the spiritual wealth locked up in Mayakovsky's plays....



Drawings by Mayakovsky for the production of *The Bath House*.

After the première of *The Bath House*, the whole situation changed. True, there were plenty of doubters, as before. When, encouraged by the success of *The Bath House*, we began working on *The Bedbug*, weary voices were again heard saying that *The Bedbug* wouldn't be any use as theatre, that *The Bedbug* was not even a play, just a kind of dramatist's *jeu d'esprit* to which the author himself had attached no importance. On the eve of the première of *Mystery*, these controversies arose again with redoubled vigour. But no attacks could now halt the triumphant progress of Mayakovsky's plays round the theatres of the Soviet Union and the rest of the world.

Since our own production, Mayakovsky has been staged in dozens of Soviet theatres, in big cities and small towns. He is performed in the theatres of the fraternal republics and he is brought to Moscow for festivals of national art. All his plays are performed by amateur companies, including *Mystery-Bouffe* (it was, for instance, put on successfully before our own production by students at one of the Tashkent colleges). By the beginning of the 1958/59 season, *The Bath House* had been performed over two hundred times in our own Theatre



Mayakovsky with V. Meyerhold and V. Shebalin at a rehearsal of *The Bath House*.

of Satire, *The Bedbug* had been earmarked for its five-hundredth performance, and *Mystery-Bouffe* was being well received, although this play of Mayakovsky's is the most difficult one to put over. We performed these plays in workers' districts in Leningrad, Kiev, Minsk, Novosibirsk, the Urals, the Far East, Zaporozhye, the Crimea, Odessa, Lvov, and the Donbas, and we toured Poland with *The Bedbug* and *Mystery*.

Mayakovsky has become recognised as a dramatist all over the world. No one attempts to separate his dramatic heritage from his poetry any more. Both are loved by the people. While new editions of his works run to millions of copies, the spectator "votes with his feet" for Mayakovsky's plays, thus proving that he is a dramatist of the people. The prophecy, which he made himself not long before his death in the slogans for the first performance of *The Bath House* has finally come true:

Some folks say  
the performance is splendid,  
But the popular masses  
won't understand it.



*Get over the prejudices  
of chucked-out classes!  
They're no more silly  
than you,  
the masses!*

After gaining full recognition all over the Soviet Union, Mayakovsky's plays travelled far beyond the bounds of our country. He is performed in Prague, Warsaw, Bucharest, and Lodz. During a visit to Moscow, the famous Italian playwright Eduardo de Filippo announced his intention of having *The Bedbug* performed in Naples. There are several translations of this play in France, notably the one by André Barsacq, who staged it in the *Atelier Théâtre*, of which he is the director. Our own theatre constantly receives letters from the cities and capitals of Europe: "Send us the text of *The Bedbug* and *The Bath House*"; "Is it possible to obtain photographs of your production?"; "Please advise us how to stage Mayakovsky".

The tremendous charge of revolutionary feeling, of committed anger, and of passionate denunciation aimed at all the obsolescent forces of the old world with which Mayakovsky filled his plays, now, like atomic energy unleashed, strains to serve the progressive ideals of our time. Progressive people in all countries, "the comrades descendants", have been given a magnificent weapon with which to strike down conservatism, backwardness, bureaucracy, vulgarity, parasitism and philistinism in whatever form they may appear. "Mayakovsky lives. His genius, as before, serves the realisation of Communism," wrote the Polish poet Wladyslaw Broniewski in our visitors' book.

These are the results of the few years that have passed since the première of *The Bath House* in the Theatre of Satire—results impressive in the wealth and eloquence of the facts, but little studied so far. A mass of experience has been accumulated in bringing Mayakovsky to life on the stage: a tradition and a style are beginning to form. All this requires systematisation and generalisation. And yet how did it come about that for twenty-five years this poet's vital and thrilling dramas were under a cloud? Why did it happen? And how is it that Mayakovsky's plays, in a mere five years, have come out of the archives to take their place as true repertory items? What causes were operative then, and which ones are operative now?

I am not a theoretician, a philologist, or a Mayakovsky scholar. I am simply a practitioner who loves Mayakovsky, and for that reason I am a convinced propagandist of his plays. My own personal experience as a director who has come into contact with Mayakovsky's plays three times in recent years, and even the Theatre of Satire's experience, is

only a drop in the ocean, an insignificant particle in the existing collective experience. But I cannot help asking these questions or constantly trying to find the answers. Now that Mayakovsky's trilogy has been staged, I feel a need to pass on to the reader the thoughts which Mayakovsky inspires in us, the practising directors, and which are gradually shaping into a general conception of how Mayakovsky should be presented on stage and of the place that his dramas hold in the creative system of the contemporary theatre.

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"I am a poet. In that I am interesting," wrote Mayakovsky in his autobiography.

When the spectator, as he leaves the theatre, observes in bewilderment (and sometimes even in anger): "This is not Chekhov" or "This is not Hugo", we directors do not usually take offence. We understand that each cultured person has his or her conception of writers with a world-wide reputation. We put them on according to our own conception, the spectators watch and, on the basis of *their* conception, they judge our work. Of course, when working on *The Seagull* or *Uncle Vanya*, we have in mind Chekhov as a definite creative individuality: not just Chekhov the playwright, but Chekhov the prose writer. It is exactly the same with Mayakovsky. Nothing can be understood in his plays without a previous awareness of the giant who wrote them, or without them being seen, above all, as the plays of a *poet*.

Mayakovsky as the spokesman and singer of the Revolution, as the artist who portrayed the revolutionary storms and birth of the new communist era, is universally known and acknowledged. His poetry does not need his signature. His idiom is unique, and every schoolchild can name the characteristics that go to make his poetic style. His verses are passion and fire, the Juvenalian lash of the satirist, the lofty style of the bard and the writer of odes, the cadences of the orator; they are an escape from the heavenly toils of "poetry, that capricious female" and a going out to the millions; they are generalisation on a cosmic scale, a militant response to all the greatest events of the era; they express the festive world outlook of the victorious class; they think in gigantic images reflecting the stormy epoch in which the author of *Fine!* lived and worked.

Such is Mayakovsky the poet and such is Mayakovsky the playwright; and here we have the mainspring of his originality as a writer for the stage.

"*Mystery-Bouffe* is our great Revolution condensed by poetry and dramatic action," wrote Mayakovsky in the programme notes for a

performance in honour of the 3rd Congress of the Comintern. "Mystery is all that is great in the Revolution, and *bouffe* is what is amusing. The poetry of *Mystery-Bouffe* consists of slogans for meetings, shouts on the street, the language of the newspapers. The action of *Mystery-Bouffe* is the action of the crowd, the collision of the classes, the struggle of ideas—a miniature world in the circus arena."

The imagery in Mayakovsky's plays is inseparable from his poetry. If the lover waiting for his girl is capable of "melting the window-pane with his brow", then why should Velosipedkin not exclaim in a frenzy: "I shall chew up officials and spit out their buttons!"? If, in *Conference-Crazy*, "halves of people" act in their satirical reality ("Up to the waist here, and the rest there"), then why should Pobedonosikov in his bureaucratic fury not want to "departmentalise the planet"? Why not allow a poetic image like the cheerful flames of the cleansing fire which sweeps the dirt of the old philistine world from the face of earth? If one may dream of seeing "all the globe at the first call of 'Comrade!' turn in glad response around", then why not say of oneself to the Unclean in *Mystery*: "We shall make the rivers of the worlds splash honey, we shall pave the streets of earth with stars"? All this came from one source, was engendered by the fiery heart of the "agitator, brazen-mouthed ringleader".

But Mayakovsky's verse drama is not only full of images like those in his verse: he wove similar images into the very texture of his dramatic works and built his plot round them.

What is the time machine? An image, born of reality, that surrounded Mayakovsky every hour and every day of his life during the years of the First Five-Year Plan. It is the artistic embodiment of the incredibly compressed periods in which the once impoverished country covered a road customarily measured in centuries. This is the "tempo machine of socialist construction", to quote Mayakovsky's own definition. But this image became the basis for the plot of *The Bath House*. The fire in *The Bedbug* is also, of course, a historical metaphor; however, it is the important "peripeteia of the play", without which its further development would be impossible. Prisytkin installed in a cage is a magnificent climax to the comic fairy-tale, but this is also a symbol, an image expressing Mayakovsky's dream that, in fifty years' time, parasites like Prisytkin would be exhibited in a zoo. "We'll wash the world with a second deluge" is a line from the poem *Our March*, a poetic image of the Revolution being accomplished; but it is also the plot of the first part of *Mystery-Bouffe*. When the German in *Mystery* says, panting for breath: "More impressive than the destruction of Pompeii, the picture has become larger: Berlin was uprooted and drowned in the abyss, in the molten throat of the world"—in the play this image is transformed simply into the proposed background for the

actor playing the part of the German and becomes a fact of his life—the life of a character in a poetic drama.

When you read in the stage-directions: "Deck of the Ark. A panorama of lands everywhere disappearing under the waves"; when you think about the scenes of the action in *Mystery*—Heaven, Hell, the Whole Universe—you become aware of the continuity between Mayakovsky's drama and the philosophical, universally human muse of Goethe and Dante. You also realise that the power of the author's poetic thinking calls for actors able to personify Shakespearean passions magnified to fit the scale of events in the twentieth century.

This approach to Mayakovsky disposes of any shade of "discrepancy" that may arise when attempts are made to interpret him through the prism of conventional and realistic, in the narrow sense of the word, theatre, and when it is forgotten that Mayakovsky's realism is a very special kind of poetic realism that had no precedent and was formed by a new and revolutionary epoch. But here, of course, both words count: if it is realism at its most poetic, it is also realism at its most realistic.

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How is the main problem of aesthetics, that of the relationship between art and reality, solved in practice by Mayakovsky as a dramatist?

"I don't care a hoot about being a poet. I'm not a poet; I'm first and foremost someone who has put his pen at the service, please note, *service*, of the present moment, of present reality and its guide, the Soviet Government and the Party," explained Mayakovsky in 1927 at a debate *On 'Sovkino' policy*.

"I don't care a hoot" was said in the heat of controversy. In fact, as we know, Mayakovsky cared a great deal about his contribution to the common cause being the contribution of a poet and not just anybody. But in this instance it was important to stress something else—conscious service to his people, conscious service to the times.

Mayakovsky wrote his plays on the most urgent social themes, but their topicality certainly didn't make them ephemeral since they invariably dealt with what was deep-rooted and inherent in the life of the people. He never wasted himself on incidental or chance topics, never used a hammer to crack nuts, never descended, as a satirist, on what was moribund or transitory. Like his predecessors in the Russian theatre—Gogol, Shchedrin, Sukhovo-Kobylin and Griboyedov—he denounced only the "faults in the machinery" which at that time were serious and threatened to obstruct social progress. Devotedly serving the militant class, he was never tired of eradicating "scum" when the socialist cause demanded it. Completely involved in his times and in

step with the age, he profoundly understood the people's needs and aspirations.

Lunacharsky said of *Mystery-Bouffe*: "For the first time in the history of the revolutionary movement, we had a play which was completely identical with all the feeling of the times."<sup>1</sup> It is worth remembering the historical conditions in which *Mystery* was written: 1918, a year of famine, devastation, typhus, the Intervention, Soviet Russia in the grip of the whiteguard blockade, sabotage within the country, an endless series of difficulties facing every Party member in his daily work. Two years later, the bourgeois writer H. G. Wells could only see *Russia in the Shadows*, a devastated, unhappy country with a utopian system of control and illusory prospects. But Mayakovsky saw something quite different in the Russia of those years: he saw the gigantic creative work of the Party, recognised the historic role of the proletariat in the course and development of the Revolution, wrote *Mystery* as a hymn to the creative work which was surmounting all obstacles, denounced every aspect and form of betrayal, and helped the builders of the young republic to face the class enemy. Its accuracy of historical analysis, its prophetic power, its Party fervour and its social message made *Mystery* a classic expression of the essence and nature of our Revolution. It was a word said at the right moment—a word that the people needed.

*The Bedbug* was written later, when the revolutionary storm had been followed by a "lull". As a result of the temporary permission for private trade, various "has-beens" had recovered their hopes of reforming Soviet power and the expropriated expropriators had raised their heads again. Under the New Economic Policy, the state's immediate concern was now the struggle with growing private-property instincts, with rotten, parasitic attitudes of mind, with bourgeois influence on the younger generation. It was vitally necessary to reject philistinism outright, to brand the philistine in all his "many shapes and forms", to convince the public of the inevitable downfall of the Prisyphkins, of their uselessness when faced with the communist harmony of the future.

Mayakovsky takes a young man from a working-class environment and makes him into the leading character of the comedy, because he wants to show how harmful are the germs of philistinism, how deeply they can hit at the hitherto healthy organism. After mercilessly denouncing Prisyphkin, who has lost contact with his own class, Mayakovsky contrasts him with the residents of a youth hostel, young people, who are "quick on the move", but will not crawl out with the

<sup>1</sup> See the collection V. V. Mayakovsky. *Theatre and Cinema*, Vol. II, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1954, pp. 406-07.

white flag, will not sell their birthright for a mess of philistine pottage. And this accurately corresponded to the actual deployment of forces at that historical moment.

And when the question "who—whom?" was being decided, at the thrilling moment when the Russia of the New Economic Policy was becoming a socialist Russia, Mayakovsky wrote *The Bath House* in an endeavour to deliver a massive blow at the "general figure of the bureaucrat", at all who were obstructing the people, putting a brake on progress and discovering at each step their superfluity under socialism. He realised that we must get a move on; either we must cover a century in a few years, or the more developed bourgeois countries would crush us, annihilate us, wipe us from the face of the earth. And this made him particularly ruthless with the Pobedonosikovs and everything they stood for.

There is a direct correspondence between the idea of *The Bath House* and Lenin's views on the importance of the struggle with bureaucracy. Referring to the poem *Conference-Crazy*, and noting briefly: "I am not sure about the poetry; but as for the politics, I vouch for their absolute correctness,"<sup>1</sup> Lenin wrote: "Our worst internal enemy is the bureaucrat—the Communist who occupies a responsible (or not responsible) Soviet post and enjoys universal respect as a conscientious man.... He is very conscientious, but he has not learnt to combat red tape, he is unable to combat it, he condones it. *We must rid ourselves of this enemy, and with the aid of all class-conscious workers and peasants we shall get at him.*"<sup>2</sup> Mayakovsky did so in his play—he got through to the bureaucrat and engaged him in battle on all fronts.

Because Mayakovsky wrote apparently in jest while thinking seriously about existence, and because he went deep into the life of the people, his plays have not dated; their long-range hitting power has proved equal to their social significance. Profoundly involved in their own times, they are still useful today, helping us to eradicate everything that still remains of narrow-mindedness, bureaucracy, and philistinism. The French publicist and writer Georges Souria, who saw *The Bath House* at the Theatre of Satire, told me confidently: "As long as people fight for Communism, Mayakovsky's plays will always be their allies."

The foundations of socialism had, in fact, been laid long before the war, the age of technical progress has long since arrived in the Soviet Union, the giants of the First Five-Year Plan seem dwarfed by the

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<sup>1</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 33, p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 33, p. 225.

mighty projects of Communism, and Chudakov's wildest dreams pale before the splitting of the atom, the mysteries of cybernetics, and the daring of the inter-planetary flights. But *The Bath House* has not become a literary monument or textbook piece. It is still alive, because bureaucracy and the Pobedonosikovs have not been eliminated. Years have passed, but *The Bath House* still hits home, helping us to deal with the negative aspects of life.

Nor has *The Bedbug* become an academic play, although the New Economic Policy and the petty-bourgeois dreams associated with it have long since vanished forever. It has not become an academic play, because the middle-class longing for peace and quiet has not faded in contrast to the Soviet man's natural state of passionate struggle for the new in life, whether it be the virgin lands, or the harsh open spaces of the North, or the magic of modern chemistry, or collective-farm construction. Prisyarkin's motto "He who has fought in war is entitled to rest by a quiet stream" is alien to our understanding of happiness as creation, as action. Even today this slogan has its followers, and we must not cease fighting them for a single hour.

*The Bedbug* has not lost its point as "anti-vodka" propaganda, because drunkenness still exists and we must stir up public opinion against it. Nor have we seen the last of those who, in Mayakovsky's time, "wove their nests in theatre boxes, perched on the roots of operas, dangled from the boughs of poetry, cut Tolstoy's hair à la Marx, raised their voices and howled in alarming numbers...". Thousands of young people want to understand what real beauty is, and *The Bedbug* helps them to do so. That is why direct contact with the audience has not been lost at a single one of our performances of this play.

This also applies to *Mystery-Bouffe*, although we were warned many times that this drama is dead, and although even at the première dreary voices were heard to say that the theatre was galvanising a corpse and that *Mystery-Bouffe* was hopelessly out-of-date. The dispute was settled by the audience who bought up the tickets for our production. Mayakovsky's revolutionary message had not dated or become archaic, nor had the satirical portraits of the Clean. Soviet audiences still respond to the democratic outlook of *Mystery* with its salty humour, its cheerful overtones of fun, its suggestion of the broadsheet and the fairground sideshow.

This only happens with works which are popular in the strict sense of the word. Since they meet the demands of the time and the interests of the people, they become, as the years go by, dear to the hearts of later generations and to the whole world. Mayakovsky, that literary rebel and past master of the art of shocking the intelligentsia, was with the people heart and soul, and this influenced everything he wrote.

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Like all great poets, Mayakovsky was a dreamer.

The country's future, the communism of tomorrow, had a powerful and irresistible fascination for him. "... I see it—clear as hallucination, so clear, it seems just finish with these rhymes, and lo—you land in the most magnificent of times," he wrote in the poem *It*. His dream was not unsubstantial or utopian: it was the same fruitful vision, outstripping the actual course of events and about which Lenin spoke in his *What Is to Be Done?* This dream did not "veer to one side" but strove towards all the best in our future, which even today was being prepared by the planned toil of the people.

Mayakovsky considered it his duty as a writer and citizen actively to help this process, "to reel in the future" and pull into the present everything possible and as quickly as possible. "Weak artists mark time," he wrote, "and wait for the event to retreat into the past so that they can draw it; strong ones run ahead to get a grasp of time." This is the law of his craft as a playwright. To adapt an image from *The Bath House*, it might be said that Mayakovsky and the future met each other halfway, like two gangs driving a tunnel. Today, we are impressed by the boldness and accuracy of Mayakovsky's predictions and by the number of prophecies in his plays which actually came true.

Take *Mystery*, an early play in which Mayakovsky was trying his hand as a dramatist. Remember the circumstances in which it was written: the Civil War, devastation, silent blast furnaces and disused factory chimneys; and then, suddenly, we read in the foreword to the second edition of *Mystery*: "Today the will of millions is straining for the commune, and in half a century, perhaps, the aerial dreadnoughts of the commune will hurtle out to attack the distant planets." This is a straightforward and direct breakthrough into our own times, into the era of sputniks, rocket flight, and the conquest of interplanetary space. But this is not the only example of prophecy in *Mystery-Bouffe*. The deepening and development of the Revolution as it attracted more and more new countries into its orbit, the awakening of the Oriental peoples, the fall of Berlin, the image of the stone Hohenzollerns flying up head over heels from the Siegesallee and the hymn to the proletarians as "the architects of new lands, the decorators of planets", Man's story about the world of the future in which he envisages a variety of "electricity services" and the creative transformation of nature ("I would have pineapples growing on fennel roots six times a year"), and the taming of the ocean depths ("the sea-bed even more fertile than the meadow")—every word a miracle of prophecy! Can *Mystery* ever age after that?



The joy of the Phosphorescent Woman in *The Bath House* at the feat of the "inconspicuous young men whose names burn on plaques of annulled gold" — this is something we can understand. How many of those nationally famous names we remember now! And how accurately our own times are summed up by the girl delegate from the year 2030: "Only today, after my brief flight round, have I looked about me and realised the power of your will and the thunder of your storm, which has grown up so quickly into our happiness and the joy of the whole planet. With what ecstasy I looked today at reality of what to us are ancient legends about your struggle against the whole armed world of parasites and slavers. You are too busy to step back and admire yourselves, but I am happy to tell you of your greatness."

This constant apostrophising of the "comrades descendants" accounts for many structural characteristics of Mayakovsky's plays: the role of fantasy and invention in *Mystery*, *The Bath House*, and *The Bedbug*. Mayakovsky not only introduces fantastic imagery into the fabric and plots of his dramatic works, but he invests this imagery with his own interpretation of the future, thereby satisfying his need to measure the present against the future. This law is universal for all Mayakovsky's plays.

The leading role in *Mystery* is played by an "ordinary man" who has appeared on the scene "not from a class, not from a nation, not from a tribe", but from "future time", he has seen "the thirtieth and the fortieth centuries". In the 1918 production, Mayakovsky played this part himself, considering it the most important. Man abruptly turns the plot of *Mystery*, seeing off the Unelean on their heroic "itinerary" through Heaven and Hell, through the earthly and heavenly abysses to the promised land of Communism. Without Man, the whole second part of Mayakovsky's verse epic would be impossible. The future rises to its full height before the proletarians who are being weakened by devastation and famine, enticing them with the prospect of unknown "realms", affirming the practicability of the revolutionary dream.

In *The Bedbug*, the picture of the future is developed even more extensively, although not in the literal sense. Mayakovsky "did not show the socialist society", and very firmly insisted on this himself; he created an abstract, pure medium and put Prisyepkin in it so as, on the one hand, to show up this "imposing parasite" more vividly by contrast and, on the other, to demonstrate how dangerous the germs of philistinism could be to those who did not know of their existence and therefore could not put up the necessary resistance. This, by the way, was yet another blow at the naïve, the unvigilant and the amiable.

As for *The Bath House*, it is based entirely on the striving of certain characters to draw nearer to the future and of others to restrain this

passionate urge. Nothing makes sense in *The Bath House* unless it is seen as a fierce struggle for time, which must be pushed forward harder and harder if our great cause is not to be ruined. And, of course, the station called "the year 2030" was, for Mayakovsky, not a destination, but merely a major transitional stage on the way to the triumph of Communism.

This is the message of Mayakovsky's fantasy. Let us repeat: it may seem arbitrary and amusing on the surface, but it is serious in essence. By introducing an element of fantasy into the satire, Mayakovsky is following a tradition of Russian and, indeed, of world literature and drama; but at the same time he argues with it. His fantasy is far removed from H. G. Wells' castles-in-air or from the Hoffmanniana of the German romantics: it does not lead us away from life, it brings us nearer to it and allows us to glimpse, even if only fleetingly, the ideal world for which we are fighting. Mayakovsky's fantasy is not illusory; it is something that has not yet come true. It is a realistic fantasy that, as I think, definitely curbs the director's imagination, organising and channelling that imagination along the lines of realistic vision. "I glorify the homeland that is, but three times the one that's to be" is a guide for those who want to stage Mayakovsky as he himself demanded.

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The driving force behind Mayakovsky's satire is a fervent affirmation of Communism and a passionate interest in its ultimate triumph.

He called himself the muck-cleaner of the Revolution, while continuing to be its poet. "I am with those who have come out to build and clean" is the double meaning of his activity. "To build and clean"—this is the whole meaning of Mayakovsky as a complete, integral creative personality. And it is here that we find the fundamental difference between his satire and what had been achieved in this genre before him.

Mayakovsky's attitude to the artistic heritage of the past was in many ways that of a consumer (with all due respect to the purists!). As a writer, he was totally lacking in prejudice and everything was grist that came to his mill: he was not afraid to combine and modify existing means of expression. He put into practice Lenin's idea that a Communist should become the beneficiary of everything worthwhile evolved by mankind.

For a "nihilist", he was, in fact, remarkably conversant with the old literature, and his plays are in no way outside the mainstream of Russian drama. But his attitude to the classics, as can be seen from his use of fantasy, was original. He learned from them—and in this, as it

were, gave an object lesson in creative innovation, refining to a hitherto unheard-of degree what he had absorbed from his predecessors, creating something purely his own out of tradition, and striking new paths across the literary "virgin soil". He could, on occasion, "lisp in iambs" (there are plenty of iambs in Mayakovsky's verse) only to break up the sluggish flow of the five-beat line there and then and charge it with fire and iron.

There are many points of contact between Mayakovsky's satire and that of classical Russian literature: the same preference for significant rather than chance subjects, the same political fearlessness and burning hatred for scum of all kinds, and for "the vulgarity of the vulgar"; the same confidence that the idea of a satirical work legitimately acquires another form of existence in fantasy; the same consciousness of satire's right to exaggerate, to intensify, to use hyperbole, and the same use of names which immediately conjure up an image of the character concerned. There is also the same selection of "amazing adventures" which focus the evil aspects of life under the theatre's "magnifying glass", and there is the same stunning force in the aphoristic structure of the cues and the same masterly verbal moulding of the imagery. And yet Mayakovsky represents an entirely different stage of satirical creativeness. His is the satire of the new world, satire from the standpoint of the victorious class which is conducting the progressive struggle for Communism, and this struggle is the super-objective of all Mayakovsky's satirical works.

"If satire is to be true satire and achieve its aim," wrote Saltykov-Shchedrin, himself a genius at this genre, "it must, first, make the reader sensible of the ideal which is its creator's point of departure and, secondly, it must clearly understand the object of its sting." This was the dream of the Russian satirists, but not all were successful. They coped with the second task, but were constantly in difficulties with the first. While convincing the reader of the rottenness of the whole existing system and of the inevitable doom of a social system which had already shown its historical invalidity, they could offer little in exchange except the universal human ideas of truth and justice.... I think Herzen hit the nail on the head when he observed that Russian writers, the artists of critical realism, as we would say now, "announced no new revelation, but got rid of the old lie". They knew very well how we shouldn't live, but they didn't yet know how we should. They were successful "muck-cleaners", but they often had nothing to celebrate (I am referring to the satirists of the past), although they loved their homeland passionately.

As an artist of socialist realism, Mayakovsky overcame these historical limitations of their work. Successively disclosing all the various "faults in the machinery", he jealously and scrupulously

guarded it from contamination, damage and hostile tendencies, and he was in this sense the outstanding master-craftsman of a fundamentally new and affirmative satire. This vital quality of his dramas also found reflection in their very structure and influenced his technique of organising his plays.

Mayakovsky was effective as a satirist not merely as a result of "starting out" from a clear communist ideal; he threw this ideal into direct and violent dramatic conflict with its enemies. The Unclean and the Clean and, with them, the priestly rabble and the fairy-tales about Heaven and Hell; Prisyarkin and the boys from the youth hostel in the first part of the comedy, and the people of the future society in the second; Pobedonosikov with his entourage and the Komsomols who are building a time-machine—in Mayakovsky, this is a typical deployment of forces and the basis of the dramatic conflict in his plays. That is why *Mystery* gives not merely a satirical picture of our epoch, but an epic and heroic one as well. *The Bedbug*, in Mayakovsky's own words, is an "abusive" but optimistic Soviet play, while *The Bath House* is not only a critique, but a "lively, joyous account of how the working class is building socialism".

Mayakovsky's plays are a complex blend of lyricism and irony, sarcasm and enthusiasm, the sublime and the ridiculous. As an artist richly endowed with all shades of feeling, he does not put on a solemn face or lose his sense of humour when the positive characters in the comedy come onto the scene. "Mayakovsky smiles", "Mayakovsky laughs", "Mayakovsky pokes fun"—all three aspects of the title of the famous collection by Mayakovsky are relevant to his elaborately constructed and yet integral plays. But the lives and the struggle of his positive heroes are full of such noble meaning and testify to such ideal qualities, that Mayakovsky's plays compel people not only to laugh at the idlers and parasites who, in the final analysis, punish themselves, but to rejoice full-heartedly at the victory of the new principles in our life.

The positive ideal, triumphant in life, finds its place in satirical comedy too. Perhaps this is indeed satire's "highest qualification" about which Mayakovsky dreamed so passionately.

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What is Mayakovsky's poster technique? Is there any justification for the charge that his plays are dominated by schematic images and mask characters?

Undoubtedly—or so it would seem at first glance.

Mayakovsky's satire (like, incidentally, all satire) eschews vagueness and shuns half-shades. Mayakovsky liked to say bluntly who the

scum are, to give a precise, off-the-cuff description of each character. "He is as smooth and polished as a mirror-glass ball. Only his bosses are reflected on his shining surface, and even then upside-down." This is the first we hear about Optimistenko, that Cerberus at the doors of the bureaucracy: the rest is only a development of the original description. "They are the young class, they understand everything in their own way. They bring their ancient, pure proletarian origin and their union cards into your home, and yet you begrudge them a ruble!" says Oleg Bayan, reproaching Mme. Renaissance, the owner of a hairdressing saloon; and this one sentence indicates the dirty deal on which the plot of *The Bedbug* is based. "He's such a clerkling," says Polya to the Komsomols, and the diminutive "-ling" gives us an immediate picture of the kind of person Nochkin must be. Mayakovsky wastes no time; he paints richly and vividly in oils, and each of the plays is undoubtedly "publicistic, problematic, and tendentious". But is this poster technique? Let us return to Mayakovsky's verse. After all, these plays were written by a great poet.

*"I'll come at four," said Maria.*

*Eight.*

*Nine.*

*Ten.*

How would this be handled by an artist with a different approach to imagery? There would be a whole psychological sequence describing in detail the hero's feelings, his nervousness, the first half-hour, hour, and hour-and-a-half of waiting; hope alternating with despair; the conviction that the beloved is not coming; dark forebodings about their future relationship. Here are nine words and four terse lines, a dry summary of what has happened. So much is implied by the simple fact of this broken date: the dispassionate clock-chimes — "Eight", "Nine", "Ten" — fall hollow and heavy like stones into a well; the hero's character and the depth and strength of his love can be seen in his determined, exhausting and unswerving patience. "Thousands of tons of verbal ore" indeed must be smelted to find so comprehensive and telling a formula for what has happened, and not a single extra word is necessary. Mayakovsky always expresses himself in this way. He clearly prefers the telegram to all other forms of communication between the work of art and the spectator or reader. When writing a letter, we generally overdo the details, wander off the subject, give reasons for a request. But a telegram has to be brief: "Send five hundred", "Accepted university", and so on. Each of these statements suggests a picture, and the imagination fills in the rest with ease. This is not poster or abstract art, but life condensed and compressed. Mayakovsky's plays are like this too: their "poster technique" is merely the economy of the

great master who can say much in a few words, and each word speaks volumes.

"The material which I worked up and used for the comedy is from a pile of mundane facts which came to hand or entered my head from all over the place during the whole of my newspaper and publicistic work, especially my work for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, wrote Mayakovsky in his article on *The Bedbug*. Elsewhere, he commented: "There are no situations in my play which are not based on dozens of actual instances." As for *Mystery*, no comment is needed here. Mayakovsky put the whole world revolution into the few pages of *The Flood*. Such highly condensed typification was unheard-of before Mayakovsky (with the possible exception of Pushkin's *Little Tragedies*), and is a source of embarrassment to those who propagandise the "poster technique" theory about his plays.

Meanwhile, Mayakovsky insisted that the images of the drama should be collective, reserving his poster techniques for "Windows of ROSTA" and passionately advocating generalisation as the proper course for major art.

"It would be possible to base a pamphlet about Chamberlain on a chance incident. Producing a profounder kind of literature does not mean replacing Chamberlain with the universe. It means choosing for this particular Chamberlain more of those particular facts which concern him; it means to typify, to systematise, to elaborate, but with one aim only, if the original skit was a tap on the nose—the resulting profounder literary effort must bring its fist down on Chamberlain's top hat."

This was Mayakovsky's working method, and it was the method of a master-realist.

In his well-known answer to the poet Vadim Bayan, who had taken offence at the image of Oleg Bayan<sup>1</sup> in *The Bedbug*, Mayakovsky carefully denied the charge of having resorted to the technique of the literary lampoon. Concerning the general, frequently encountered features of a type in which the poet Bayan and dozens of singers and fellow-travellers of the New Economic Policy could easily recognise themselves, Mayakovsky spoke out with his usual bluntness: "Shooting up these signs of kinship with an antipathetic but typical personage is already becoming respectful from the Soviet public's point of view, and if this is so, then I shall leave my 'hero' in peace and you will have to change your name instead."

There could be no more precise way of stating one's desire and right

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<sup>1</sup> Bayan—old Russian for a bard or minstrel; but it is also used for an accordion.—Tr.

to put a condensed and concentrated thought of far-reaching social significance into every line of a work.

What is it, if not a formula summing up the life of the country from the historic salvoes of the *Aurora* to the heroism of the First Five-Year Plan: "What transitions we made, Comrade! We made battleships, then cigarette lighters, then finished with the lighters and started on bayonets, made some bayonets for a while, then changed over to tractors, and still managed to squeeze in all kinds of college studies." So speaks one of the Komsomols in *The Bath House* in a scene with the Phosphorescent Woman. An incidental monologue, but so full of meaning and demanding such precise vision from the actor and such an ability to put living, patriotic feelings into a dry historical fact signifying years of hard work, unlimited achievements, thousands of manifestations of human enthusiasm at its finest. Here is another instance—the speech by the barefoot boy during the scene in the hostel: "Never mind, when I'm a chief engineer and wearing out boots every day, I'll sniff myself out a nice little flat too." This is a whole programme of life: philistinism is infectious; Prisyarkin's love of "modern conveniences" immediately finds its imitators—and so we have the barefoot boy dreaming of "resting by a quiet stream"; the typicality of the phenomenon is immeasurably enhanced by the boy's unexpected moral support.

Mayakovsky's characters are real flesh and blood human beings. Optimistenko's fondness for the smoothness of bureaucratic procedure and his open devotion not to the job, but to persons, are as concrete as they are motivated by his very nature; so are the drunken complaints of the guests at the "red wedding" as they sigh over "goffered chignons", and so is the impracticality of Chudakov, constantly striving for infinity on the wings of dream. It is a long way from this kind of detail to the simplifications of poster art.

Can an image represent a type if it is not backed up by the character's personal history, mode of thought, way of feeling, and all the wealth of individual characteristics which form a personality? The characters created by Mayakovsky are types. We talk about the "Prisyarkins" and the "Pobedonosikovs" of this world, just as we talk of the "Manilovs", the "Khlestakovs", and the "Oblomovs". Prisyarkin and Pobedonosikov both have their private lives, their cast of thought and their way of feeling. It is enough to hear what Velosipedkin has to say about Pobedonosikov: "To the question 'what did you do before 1917?' he put down on the form: 'I was in the Party'. No one knows which one, and no one knows whether it was 'B' in brackets for Bolsheviks or 'M' for Mensheviks. Perhaps it was neither. Then he threw tobacco in the warders' eyes and sneaked out of gaol. And now, twenty-five years later, time itself has blinded him with the tobacco of trivialities and

Sketches by Kuk-  
rynixy for the  
production of *The  
Bedbug*; Oleg Bayan  
(1929)



minutes.... What can one see with such eyes? Socialism? No, nothing but an inkwell and a paper-weight." This description brings the man to life in all his uselessness to the socialist cause. But is this the only point of reference for the actor who is trying to create a three-dimensional and typical image of Pobedonosikov?

It also involves, among other things, "making agitation, propaganda and tendentiousness come to life"; and in this Mayakovsky saw the "difficulty and meaning of the modern theatre". Mayakovsky certainly did not find the monodimensionality and schematicism of the poster convenient, although he was very partial to "agitational bias". He wanted dramatic art to be as telling, vivid and immediately understand-

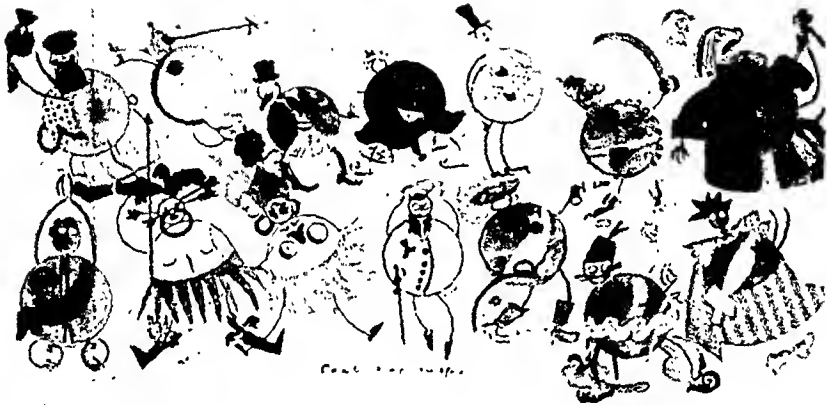


Sketches by Kukryniksy for the production of *The Bedbug*; Prisyphkin (1929)



able as the poster; but he also wanted it to distinguish itself for all the wealth of realistic imagery known to the Russian stage. He rose up in arms against "psychologising", but he was not in the least hostile to an art that was psychologically true to life and accommodated all the complexity of his characters' feelings and experiences. Except that his psychology was as terse and succinct as the lines of an official despatch.

"We wanted to live, we wanted to work.... Is that all there is to it?" asks Zoya Beryozkina, and she shoots herself. A few words, but they are essential, and it is enough that the actress playing Zoya should be able to convey on stage all the bitterness of the girl's rejected love and the collapse of her hopes. Prisyphkin is a toady and a parasite, a bacillus



Sketches by Mayakovsky for *Mystery-Bouffe* (1919).

in human form, but when he shrieks in despair and terror as he falls headlong from the planks and levers of the glittering defreezing machine: "Where have I landed? Where have you landed me?" — we are aware of genuine human feeling, otherwise the scene loses its point completely. When Underton, the little typist, apologises for using lipstick, since she was not in the underground movement, but has freckles on her nose, we feel sympathy for this little girl, evidently lonely and unsupported who, simply by "hanging on by her lips", hopes to make her way through life. The characters of *Mystery* seem more like masks, but Mayakovsky has described their agonies of starvation in such a way that it is impossible to play *The Ark* without what

Stanislavsky used to call the truth of the characters' physical self-awareness.

And it is impossible to dispense with genuine feelings in the closing scenes of *The Ark*, when Mayakovsky ranges through a whole gamut of psychological reactions: first—fatigue, hunger, the despair of the Unclean; then dismay evoked by the appearance of Man, and the decision forming in the minds of the strong in spirit not to let slip the "passing stranger", not to give in to those who "use Christ as a snare", then the growing enthusiasm for what Man is telling them and the vision of those "magic pages" with which he appeals to the imagination of the characters; the silence after his disappearance, when the Unclean, badly shaken, try to grasp what has happened and who that "irresponsible spirit" was; finally, the rejoicing on the deck of the Ark, the elation which grips the characters, their militant and passionate outburst: "Through the clouds—forward! Through the skies—forward!" This is how we decided to stage the scene, but what we achieved was feeble compared with Mayakovsky's version.

The whole scene is presented frankly and sketchily, with an appeal to the audience and with the obvious intention of "igniting", of "stirring up" those who are closely following the development of the play in order to obtain from them an active response to the events and characters. This is all that Mayakovsky's poster technique amounts to. When put to the test, it proves sufficiently remote from the meaning which we usually attribute to the term.

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Mayakovsky's "telegraph" style is conveyed, needless to say, in a language of exceptional compactness and density.

He "makes" it exactly as in the poems and the lyrics: the same incredibly stringent selection, the same finish, precision, and meticulousness in verbal instrumentation, the same complex play of alliterations and rhythms, the same word music. And all this is vigorously strained through the idea—the "target" of the work. It is possible to find in the same play instances of language used for comedy, slapstick, characterisation and lyricism, full of pure poetry. And not only in *Mystery*, which is close to Mayakovsky's poetry, but also in his prose plays *The Bath House* and *The Bedbug*.

I am not going to quote a lot of examples. Mayakovsky's diction has been sufficiently studied. I merely wish to say that we who went through the triple discipline of *The Bath House*, *The Bedbug* and *Mystery* learned from bitter experience how disadvantageous it is to "drawl and distort" Mayakovsky's forged and tempered language and

what a price one must pay for neglecting even a single comma. Mayakovsky has given a difficult task to our actors, who are used to treating the dialogue in Soviet plays rather freely and to rewording the script to suit themselves, cutting and omitting as they see fit. But in Mayakovsky, where everything seems haphazard and peripheral to the basic conflict, there is a deep hidden meaning, and the actor who fails to penetrate to it inevitably robs himself.

What seems haphazard in Mayakovsky has simply not yet been deciphered, or understood, or investigated in connection with the idea, or "target", of the play. Find the right key, and the word lights up and sparkles with living colour, acquires its full impact, is easily put over to the audience. There are so many brilliant aphorisms in Mayakovsky's plays, and so many of them have become part of our language.

Such are Mayakovsky's comedies. Go conscientiously into the logic of them and the variegated crusts of unfamiliarity fall away, the work is illuminated by pure poetry, and each word acquires its meaning. Then begins the happy process of understanding Mayakovsky the playwright: "the thing in itself" becomes "the thing for us".

It is no accident that Mayakovsky's plays can be transplanted so easily elsewhere — especially to the socialist countries. The soil there has been prepared to take them. Those artists who are seriously concerned with the class upheavals of their time inevitably take after Mayakovsky and follow the trails he blazed. Mayakovsky has influenced all the poetry of the left front: Aragon, Neruda, Guillén, Amadou, Hikmet, Nezvál, Broniewski, and, through them, the drama of those countries. He has had an even more direct impact on the progressive playwrights. The work of these artists is distinguished by the tackling of major social conflicts which have long split mankind into two antagonistic social systems, the attempts to find out about "the age and oneself", to speak out for one's generation, the inclination for rhetorical methods and digressions into the future and the past of the characters. Mayakovsky's theatrical views are reflected in the philosophical and publicistic theatre of Hikmet and in the work of Brecht with his political drama-legends.

To put it another way, Mayakovsky's plays belong to the era of world wars and to the proletarian Revolution which began in Russia and is growing and spreading before our eyes. "We too are realists, but not with everything laid on for us, not with our eyes fixed on the ground, — we are in a new, future way of life multiplied by electricity and Communism." This is the exact formula of Mayakovsky's theatre as given by Mayakovsky himself. His realism, directly dependent on the historical circumstances that engendered it, is special, philosophical, publicistic, agitational, spectacular, and hyperbolic. "We too will show real life, but it has been transformed by the theatre into a most unusual spectacle."

That superlative is typical of Mayakovsky the playwright. Not just a spectacle, not even an unusual spectacle, but a most unusual spectacle is what he demands of the theatre which intends to stage his dramas.

Mayakovsky sought a form of agitation which would be "gay and ringing"; he asserted the magic of the theatre which puts the world under the magnifying glass of its art. He loved it when the theatre did not hide the fact that it was theatre, "did not imitate real life". Defining *The Bath House* as a "drama with circus and fireworks", and *The Bedbug* as a "comic fairy-tale", he thereby enjoined the participants to take risks, to improvise, to fool around, to extend their techniques to those of the circus. Mayakovsky demanded of the director an active imagination, brilliant decisions, the ability to override all canons and clichés. He said that "the impact of comedy on the spectator can be multiplied tenfold" if the director "really lets rip". Mayakovsky on the stage is improvisation, invention, theatricality, abstraction. He is a direct appeal to the audience, a crossing of the footlights to draw into the action all who are present at the performance. He is sharpened, resonant, heightened theatrical diction—after all, in order to say, "I shall chew up officials and spit out their buttons", the actor must arrive at the mood and the ability to feel in terms of hyperbole, passionately, forcefully, in a manner never demanded by the everyday—in the strict sense of the word—theatre. In short, for Mayakovsky the theatre is an arena for agitation, but it is a "cheerful, publicistic arena".

The circus, the sideshow, mummers, and masques, are concepts in no way alien to Mayakovsky the playwright. His theatre takes us back to the essentials of the popular fairground spectacle. Mayakovsky, like Pushkin in his time, strives to transfer to the public square the drama which was stolen many years ago from the people and installed in the palaces. The popular element of play breaks through the seriousness of his dramatic content, not detracting from that seriousness, but realistically reinforcing it—a function performed by the fools in the Shakespearean theatre.

What is *Mystery*, with its traditional biblical subject matter so neatly exploded from inside by Mayakovsky, but the ancient "episode of the Ark" which has occurred time and time again in various aspects and forms in the popular theatre of all countries? And, indeed, the mystery play as a form was as much a church as a popular spectacle.

It is essential to adopt the position of the inexperienced spectator and to become permeated with his attitude in order to believe, as Mayakovsky believed, in the symbolism of the terrestrial globe and then the Ark encumbering the stage in order to preserve the feeling of truth in a play-spectacle which operates through images generalised to

the point of symbol. What popular theatre did not attempt to put the hero in Hell and then in Heaven, and subject him to all earthly and heavenly trials in order to bring him back victorious to "the same corner" as the one to which the Unclean are returned in Mayakovsky? *Mystery* is inconceivable without pantomime, gags and clowning, all organically combined with a true message and high social overtones.

There are also moments of pantomime in *The Bath House* and *The Bedbug*, in spite of their relatively greater "realism" as compared with *Mystery*. What is the wedding scene in *The Bedbug* if not a short scenario, a dramatist's outline on the basis of which many varied "play" decorations must be sewn before the play can become a show? "The Wedding" is a tremendous scene, a full-scale act charged with the complex life of the typical characters, whereas in Mayakovsky's script it takes up only a few pages and many of the characters have no lines at all. A similar "play" and intermediary character is, of course, borne by the scene with the firemen in *The Bedbug*, and the seventh scene ("Catching the Bedbug"), and the building of the time-machine in *The Bath House*, and its flight.

In his *Philosophical Notebooks*, Lenin said of Feuerbach's works that a witty manner of writing presupposes imagination in the reader. Mayakovsky proceeds from the same supposition. He is convinced that the people possess this imagination. And the people have loved and accepted Mayakovsky because his plays, popular in their content, are also of the people, as I have tried to demonstrate, in the principle according to which they depict life.

Speaking on October 15, 1927 at a debate on the policy of the Soviet cinema during a time of a bitter and tense struggle for a progressive film art, Mayakovsky subjected to sharp and justifiable criticism certain serious shortcomings in the work of this organisation and declared, with his characteristic sense of responsibility for the future of Soviet culture:

"I want to develop ideas today. If I see that millions are catered for by the cinema, I want to implant my poetic talents in cinematography, since the professions of scenario writer and poet are essentially the same."

These words were dictated by his profound sense of artistic duty to the people, his homeland, and the Communist Party, and by a passionate desire to help in building a progressive Soviet cinema and to contribute to the development of the most popular, and therefore most important, of the arts. As poet of the revolution, "mobilised and enlisted by the October call-up", Mayakovsky could not help but use the enormous potentialities of cinema art in his ambitious work as an innovator. This explains the unflagging interest which, from the very outset of his career, and especially in the Soviet era, Mayakovsky showed for the art of the cinema, actively joining in the struggle which was raging on the cinema front, writing scenarios, speaking at debates, giving his views in articles and poems on the urgent problems of cinema art, participating directly in the work of the cinema as an actor.

Mayakovsky's first contact with the cinema dates back to the earliest, pre-revolutionary period of his activity. In the foreword to a collection of his scenarios which was being prepared in 1927, Mayakovsky recalled that his first scenario *Chase after Glory* was written by him in 1913 for the firm of R. Persky. To quote Mayakovsky himself, the scenario was read through very carefully by a representative of the firm, who said hopelessly:

"'Rubbish.'

"I went home. I felt squashed," Mayakovsky ruefully admits. "I tore up the scenario. Later, a film based on this scenario was seen touring the Volga. It has evidently been read more carefully than I thought."<sup>1</sup>

We know nothing about the scenario except what the author tells us above. But the fact that it was written testifies to the lively interest awakened in the youthful Mayakovsky by the cinema. This is further confirmed by the fact that the first articles in which Mayakovsky gave his views on artistic matters were devoted to the mutual relationships of the theatre and the cinema and were published in *Kino-zhurnal* in 1913.

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<sup>1</sup> V. V. Mayakovsky, *Collected Works*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1939-1949, Vol. 11, p. 409.

From the very first days of the Soviet state's existence, Mayakovsky joined in the life of the young Soviet cinema. In 1919, he twice addressed the board of the Graphic Arts Department of the People's Commissariat for Education, speaking about the activity of the cinema committees and sections. These speeches were the beginning of a whole series of statements by Mayakovsky about the development of the revolutionary new cinema, and they can be found in the poet's shorthand notes of his speeches, articles, and verse. The Soviet years also saw the beginning of Mayakovsky's practical work in the cinema not only as a scenario-writer, but as an actor. Moreover, Mayakovsky's interest in the special possibilities of cinema art, so far from waning, actually deepened with time.

In 1918, he wrote the scenarios and appeared in the films *Not Born for Money*, *The Lady and the Hooligan*, and *Chained in Film*. In 1920, the propaganda film *To the Front* was made from a scenario by Mayakovsky. *Benz No. 22*, of which only fragments are extant, was written in 1922. From 1926 to 1927, Mayakovsky was particularly active as a scenario-writer. In two years he wrote a whole series: *Children*, *The Elephant and the Matchstick*, *The Heart of the Cinema*, *Lyubov Shkafolyubova*, *Dekabryukhov and Oktyabryukhov*, *How Are You?*, *History of a Revolver*, *Comrade Kopytko*, and *Forget the Fireside*.

Two scenarios—an adaptation of Jack London's novel *Martin Eden* (the resulting film was entitled *Not Born for Money*), and an adaptation of *The Workers' Teacher* by Edmondo de Amicis (the film was entitled *The Lady and the Hooligan*) were judged very harshly by Mayakovsky in the foreword to a collection of his scenarios in 1927, when he described them as "sentimental rubbish written to order". The harshness of this judgement evidently had something to do with the fact that, when working on films, Mayakovsky was only able to express to a very limited degree his basic approach to film-making and, above all, during the shooting, as he noted himself in the same foreword, "the director, the designer, the cast and all the rest did their utmost to deprive these films of all possible interest".

The scenario of *Not Born for Money*, like the film itself, has not survived. From a résumé dictated by one of the production team, we know that the novel *Martin Eden* was merely used by Mayakovsky as the basis for the creation of a more independent work.

Mayakovsky transferred the action of the novel to Russia and changed the chief character into a worker, Ivan Nov, who is making a name for himself as a poet. The central theme of the scenario was the fate of the artist under the conditions of the bourgeois society, with which he enters into conflict. In the development of this conflict, much



prominence is also given to the theme of love corrupted by the power of cash. But Mayakovsky did not confine himself to this.

In a note published in 1918 in the journal *Mir Ekрана* (Screen World) and probably written by Mayakovsky himself, it was stated that Jack London's "gigantic and powerful Martin Eden had been spoilt by a weepy ending". In contrast to him, the note continues: "... Mayakovsky gives us Ivan Nov, who is the same Eden, but who manages not to be broken under the weight of gushing gold."

Ivan Nov, played in the film by Mayakovsky himself, does not commit suicide in the end like Jack London's hero, but, having lost faith in the bourgeois middle-class world, only pretends to kill himself and becomes a worker again.

*The Young Lady and the Hooligan* had no scenario in the strict sense of the word. Mayakovsky merely made notes on the story by de Amicis, and these were used to make up a schedule for each day's shooting. The story of a young worker—the "hooligan"—who falls in love with the "lady", a teacher at an adult school, is reformed by this love and is killed in a brawl while defending the honour of the teacher, could not, of course, offer any interesting or wide possibilities for film adaptation. However, certain of the methods used by Mayakovsky are of interest. For instance, in attempting to convey as vividly as possible the psychological state of the "hooligan", who is suffering from a passionate and pure love, Mayakovsky shows how, as he walks through the park, he imagines that he can see the teacher standing behind every tree; he sits in the tavern, and she appears to him as a ghost passing among the tables.

The chief interest of this film, which has been preserved intact, is, of course, in Mayakovsky's performance as the "hooligan".

A. V. Rebikova, who played the teacher, was at that time an actress with Studio One of the Moscow Arts Theatre and was working under Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov. She tells us that during the shooting, Mayakovsky, more than many professionals, had "a really serious approach to filming, really lively human eyes and a real rapport with a partner".

As is testified by cameraman Ye. Slavinsky who shot the film, Mayakovsky designed his own costume for the part—a blouse with an open-necked collar, a jacket, and a crumpled peaked cap. Slavinsky points out that, as Mayakovsky himself admitted, he enjoyed playing the rebel. "He evidently felt very much at home in the part."

Mayakovsky is impressive in the way he achieves a convincingly lifelike portrayal of the hero, in spite of the cinema's limited technical possibilities at that time. As is known, they often had an inhibiting effect even on experienced professional actors, making their performances seem artificial and forced.

Mayakovsky's participation in the film did much, of course, to overcome the sentimentality encouraged by the story line. The theme of the hero's manly, radiant and inspiring love was developed austere-ly, stage by stage, without undue melodrama.

In one of the notes published after the release of *The Young Lady and the Hooligan*, it was specially commented that Mayakovsky "made a very good impression and promises to be a good character actor in films".

As was stressed by Mayakovsky himself in the foreword to his collected scenarios, the most interesting was the one for *Chained in Film*, of which only a few fragments are extant. This was a highly original work. Mayakovsky wrote of it: "Having familiarised myself with film technique, I wrote a scenario which was on the same level as our innovatory literary work. The production, also by 'Neptune' (that is, the private film company which had made the two preceding films—B.P.), made a disgraceful mess of the scenario."

*Chained in Film* undoubtedly brings to mind certain motifs already noted in the scenario of *Not Born for Money*, only this time they are much more fully, originally and freely stated and developed. The theme is that of an artist seeking unsuccessfully for the fulfilment of his dream, his ideal, in a bourgeois middle-class philistine environment.

Particularly interesting, and particularly typical of Mayakovsky, is the unusual interweaving of reality and fantasy which determines the whole structure of the plot. This combination, as always with Mayakovsky, is profoundly justified. It emerges only as the visual and visible expression of a poetic metaphor based on a living image charged with great content.

The films on which Mayakovsky worked in 1918 were not, in subject matter, connected with the new revolutionary activity. They were in certain respects akin to the "psychological" dramas which dated back to the pre-revolutionary cinema. Not for nothing did Mayakovsky himself call them sentimental rubbish written to order. But insofar as they showed, though only relatively, the direct influence of Mayakovsky, they countered the cherished clichés and banalities of the bourgeois middle-class cinema. Mayakovsky's participation in the making of these films was, of course, only a kind of reconnaissance and an attempt to carry the battle on to enemy territory. But Mayakovsky fought this battle with all his innate energy and sense of purpose, and this was bound to have results.

As far back as 1922, writing in a note "Cinema and Wine" for the journal *Kino-phot*, Mayakovsky stressed the enormous innovatory role of the cinema and its significance as a "disseminator of ideas"; and, stating that the art of the cinema must be wrested from bourgeois influences and made into an instrument for educating the socialist

consciousness of the masses, he wrote: "...the cinema is sick. Capitalism had thrown gold-dust into its eyes. The wily entrepreneurs are making it walk the streets. They are raking in the money by stirring the hearts of the public with their sob-stories.

"This must be stopped.

"Communism must take the cinema away from these commercial leaders of the blind....

"Otherwise, we shall have either imported American tap dance, or nothing but the 'tear-bedewed eyes' of the Mozzhukhins."

In mentioning Mozzhukhin, Mayakovsky is referring to the decadent salon films of the Russian pre-revolutionary cinema, in which the "demonic", mysteriously tragic heroes were played by Ivan Mozzhukhin, one of the "kings" of the Russian cinema at that time.

Written, apparently, in 1922, the scenario for *Benz No. 22* was one of Mayakovsky's attempts to take a direct part in film work during the early twenties.

Although only the prologue has been preserved, the general content is fairly clear. The theme of the scenario is directly connected with one of the ideological motifs also developed in *Mystery-Bouffe*. The Revolution has destroyed the fetishism of social relations in the capitalist world. The machine, liberated from the power of the "fatty"—the bourgeois—in a new world free from exploitation, ceases to be a weapon for the oppression of man and becomes his friend and helper. This motif, already clearly outlined in the first draft of *Mystery-Bouffe*, was developed much more fully in the second version, in which the machine, appearing as a member of the east in the scene "The Promised Land", says in an address to the workers: "Roar, you engines—great joy! The fatties have been dealt with and from now on I'm free!"

The same idea, evidently, was to be developed in *Benz No. 22*, in which the "hero" was a motor-car. One of the future film's subtitles, introducing the triumphal march of the victorious workers who have overthrown the power of the bourgeois, read: "Only October, which has liberated man, will also liberate the machine."

In structure, the scenario for *Benz No. 22* is very close to Mayakovsky's poster art in "Windows of ROSTA". It may even be said that the scenario is the poster imagery of "Windows" brought to life, set in motion, and translated into the language of the cinema. Some of the shots in the scenario go directly back to the corresponding poster illustrations by Mayakovsky and create a bold metaphor, vividly and dynamically realised, which expresses a definite idea with remarkable clarity and deliberate exaggeration. One episode in the scenario for *Benz No. 22*, for instance, is a distinct reminder of the snarling imperialist predators of "Windows": "The factory owner stands in

front of the car, boastfully waving his arms. He opens his mouth wide. Three car wheels (each with "profit" written on it) fly into the factory owner's mouth. The factory owner gulps them down with relish."

This episode is highly characteristic of the film's structure. The visual image, deliberately exaggerated, even fantastic and eccentric, is a vivid and powerful expression of the main idea, which is directly connected with the agitational purpose of the work as a whole.

This experiment of Mayakovsky's, though it remained unfulfilled, was only a prelude to the active and extensive film work which he was to undertake in 1926-1927. But the implications and content of the experiment are highly significant.

Made towards the beginning of the twenties, Lenin's directives on the cinema ended by advising film workers to make reels of "specifically propagandist content" which would at the same time be truly entertaining. Discussing Lenin's directives and the main goals which Soviet film-makers should pursue, A. V. Lunacharsky testifies that alongside the task of releasing newsreels which would be "publicism conveyed by images", alongside the important task of making science educational films Vladimir Ilyich considered it "no less important, and perhaps more so, to propagate our ideas in the form of entertaining pictures giving slices of life and permeated with our ideas..."<sup>1</sup>

In his scenario, which was distinctly propagandist, Mayakovsky purposely introduced documentary and newsreel elements, and also indicated a number of unusual techniques, the use of which, prompted by the visual resources of the medium, was to have determined the entertainment value of the proposed film. As a result of his subsequent practical experience as a scenario writer, Mayakovsky raised these techniques to a new and higher level, overcoming a certain flatness and over-simplification in their use which were still evident in the surviving draft of the 1922 scenario.

When writing his scenarios, Mayakovsky also closely followed the development of Soviet cinematography. His exacting and keen eye could not miss the serious shortcomings in the work of Sovkino, the organisation chiefly responsible for film production.

In March 1928, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* published a poem by Mayakovsky entitled *Cinema and Wine*, in which the poet ridiculed the businessmen who, to all intents and purposes distorting the Party line, were trying to use "cash-register" considerations as the only criterion for an approach to solving the problem of the cinema's future, thus isolating the economic task and opposing it to that of steadily improving the ideological and creative standards of the cinema as an

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<sup>1</sup> A. Lunacharsky, *The Cinema in the West and in the Soviet Union*, Russ. Ed., 1928, pp. 63-64.

art. Ridiculing these "philosophers of Sovkino" who did not realise that the growth of income from the output of films and economic competition by the film-maker with, say, the vodka industry, were only feasible if artistically high-quality films could be produced which were imbued with socialist ideology, Mayakovsky wrote:

*I don't know who  
and what is to blame,  
but  
(since quite long ago)  
The cinema  
definitely became  
as harmful as wine  
and even more so.  
And soon  
every and each  
from both  
will equallyretch.*

In drawing a contrast between films "more harmful than wine" and news features, Mayakovsky was driven to lay more stress on the significance of news and documentary cinematography. He also consistently and passionately advocated the importance of mastering the original and expressive techniques of the camera in purely news films too, that is to say, he tried to break down the impassable barrier between feature films and documentaries. Mayakovsky stressed that the newsreel "must be organised and must itself organise"; in other words, it must be structured according to definite artistic laws. Only then can it actively influence the spectator.

Supporting the line taken by the progressive Soviet cinema, seeing it as vividly embodied in *The Battleship "Potemkin"*, and denouncing the production of "entertainments with beautiful girls instead of unbeautiful news items", Mayakovsky was harshly critical of films in which he saw any debasing of ideological and artistic standards.

Significant in this respect is his assessment of a film, *The Poet and the Tsar*, which was released in 1927 and was devoted to Pushkin's last days and tragic death. The film was produced by V. Gardin, and Pushkin was played by Ye. Chervyakov. Because of its theme, the film attracted the attention of a wide public. But, because it was produced with open pretensions to visual magnificence and effect, and because the plot was based on a love story, it only gratified the tastes of the philistine public.

This was the aspect to which Mayakovsky drew attention when he referred to *The Poet and the Tsar* in the above-mentioned speech at the debate on Sovkino policy.

*The Poet and the Tsar* evoked Mayakovsky's vigorous condemnation because, while claiming to solve the gigantic and responsible task of reproducing in cinematic terms the image of Pushkin, a man of genius, it sold out great theme for the small change of cheap philistine curiosity about the "intimate" side of a great man's life. This was profiteering on the theme and vulgarising it to a considerable degree.

"Take, for instance, *The Poet and the Tsar*," said Mayakovsky. "A nice picture.... But if one thinks more deeply about it, what drivel, what a disgrace it is. Just take these few points. First, the real-life aspect.... We are being shown the most remarkable poet in the whole history of Russia, and a poet who lived a remarkable life — in other words, a very complex person. I have asked people who write poetry how they do it.... Their methods vary.... But in any case, the idiotically tousled hair, the sweeping of the left leg to one side, the sitting down at the desk and immediately writing the brilliant poem:

*A monument I've raised not built with hands,  
And common folk shall keep the path well trodden —*

this is catering to the most vulgar notion of a poet and could only be acceptable to the most vulgar people...."

As we read these wrathful and sarcastic lines, we can vividly hear the voice of Mayakovsky himself — the author of *Jubilee*, the powerful work in which he fought for the real Pushkin, not the one falsified, to quote his own words, with chocolate-box charm or with the gloss of anthology prettification. We hear the voice of the Mayakovsky who fought so that the poet's extremely arduous and important task should not (as he wrote in his article "How Is Verse to Be Made?" a little over a year before his speech at the debate on Sovkino policy) be surrounded with an atmosphere of "belief that ... the only method of production is to gaze skywards in search of inspiration while waiting for the celestial spirit of poesy to descend on the bald patch in the guise of a dove, a peacock, or an ostrich".

In his critique of *The Poet and the Tsar*, he put forward a whole programme to ensure that not only Pushkin, the great representative of Russian culture, but other distinguished figures of the past, should be represented truthfully and without embellishment or naïve modernisation.

When we affirm the living and abiding significance of Mayakovsky's heritage and his historic role in the formation of Soviet film culture, we could be mistaken in restricting ourselves to the poet's direct and immediate involvement in building up the Soviet cinema. Mayakovsky's impact was, of course, immeasurably wider and was not limited to his critical and publicistic declarations on matters of the cinema or to his practical participation in scenario-writing and film-making.



Mayakovsky with V. E. Meyerhold and N. R. Erdman  
(1928).

In the mid-twenties, our cinema and theatre for the first time made attempts—not yet very successful, it is true—to show on screen and stage the events of the Great October Socialist Revolution and to portray Lenin himself, even if only in separate, short and, in effect, purely illustrative episodes. These first, sometimes very timid, efforts, although in response to profound public need, were nonetheless not entirely successful. The Soviet cinema, like the Soviet theatre, considered that its main objective was to embody the heroic theme of the people's struggle for the victory of Communism, and so it was undeviating and systematic in their approach to the task of portraying Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the leader of the socialist revolution. They saw this task as one way of expressing the basic ideological aspirations of Soviet art and of creating the typical image of a contemporary who was the most progressive man of Soviet times.

In the solution of this task, it would be hard to overestimate the importance of Mayakovsky's poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*, which became an inspired anthem to the Communist Party. One may even go so far as to say that it was by drawing on Mayakovsky's experience, learning from him, and in many respects following directly in his footsteps, that the playwrights, scenario-writers, actors and directors were able to achieve considerable success in their work.

It was Mayakovsky's poem which suggested to them the essentially right ways and means of solving an extremely complex artistic problem.

In his poem, Mayakovsky affirmed the indissolubility of the link which should exist in the depiction of the socialist revolution, the work of the Communist Party, and that of its founder and leader, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

In his poem on Lenin, Mayakovsky demonstrated beyond all conceivable doubt that the image of Lenin could find worthy artistic form only if his life was shown concurrently with the life of the working class of Russia and with the history of our homeland.

Mayakovsky's poem disclosed with remarkable clarity the complexity of the task confronting every artist—irrespective of his medium—namely, to depict the leader of the Socialist Revolution, to show in living, complete unity "The life of Ulyanov" and "The life of Comrade Lenin"—Lenin the leader and Lenin "the most human of human beings".

The essence of the image—the bond between Lenin and the masses who were carrying history forward, his ability to listen to their voice and lead them onwards—was the main inspiration behind the image of the leader as created by the outstanding actor Boris Shchukin on screen and stage. This was seen with particular power in the play and the film *Man with Rifle*, when Lenin meets a soldier, Ivan Shadrin,



in a corridor of the Smolny Institute and, in a short conversation, decides his future for him, giving him to understand and feel that he must keep a firm grip on that rifle if he is to defend the gains of the socialist revolution.

It is notable that this scene—central to play and film alike—involuntarily calls to mind the lines from Mayakovsky's poem in which he describes how Lenin walks through the noisy, crowded Smolny Institute—"From the far end of the corridor, Lenin inconspicuously approaches":

...dug his eyes  
                                   into the motley scene...  
 ...stabbing them  
                                   into a chap in puttees,  
 dead-aiming,  
                                   sharp-edged as razors,  
 seizing the gist  
                                   as pincers would seize,  
 dragging the soul  
                                   from under words and phrases.

. . .

At the end of 1926, Mayakovsky wrote the scenario *How Are You?* which, as he stressed himself, had a special and fundamental significance for him.

The main theme of the scenario (like most of Mayakovsky's scenarios—written in the mid-twenties—except for *Children* and *Dekabryukhov* and *Oktyabryukhov*, it was not produced) was the definition of the poet's place in the workers' society. The scenario stated an important and fundamental theme, and was also partly autobiographical. The hero of the proposed film was to be the poet Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky in person. The scenario described a day in his life. Indeed, the subtitle was "A day in five cine-details".

After a short prologue, the scenario gets under way. Mayakovsky is reading the newspaper and, as he goes through the various articles, all the big and small events taking place in the world come into his room. The most important of them demand the poet's attention, reaction, and intervention.

With a truly fertile imagination, Mayakovsky builds the action on a sequence of visual metaphors, making generous use of the cinema's graphic potentialities. This method is also widely used by Mayakovsky in other scenarios, but in this one it is paramount and, sustained

throughout the development of the story, becomes the organising principle of the action.

The images that occur in *How Are You?* are vivid, three-dimensional, telling, sometimes on the grand scale, sometimes full of lively humour, and sometimes fantastic; but they are always precise, fully comprehensible, and vividly related to life. They read well and, moreover, need no explanatory notes.

For example, the newspapers being carried by the cook in a basket on her back turn into an enormous globe of the world:

"75-80. The cook walks along. The newspapers grow on her shoulders. They bow the cook down to the ground. The buildings in front of which she is walking gradually shrink. The cook becomes quite tiny. The houses shrink even further. There is an enormous globe of the world on the cook's back. She walks along, scarcely able to move her feet under the weight.

"81. A street in perspective. Tramlines coming directly towards the camera. The globe of the world appears in the background, and approaches the camera, swelling rapidly.

"82. A house entrance. The doors open of their own accord. The globe rolls up to the door. It shrinks until it is small enough to go through the doorway.

"83. Passing through the door, it rolls independently up the stairs."

This excerpt from the beginning of *How Are You?* gives a vivid example of the way in which the film has been structured.

The unexpectedness and the eccentricity of the metaphors used by Mayakovsky in this scenario are convincing in their detail and visual precision. For instance, Mayakovsky has been brought a newspaper and is reading about an earthquake in Leninakan: the objects on his writing desk begin to rock, the lamp shatters, the boiling kettle rises up amid the debris like a volcano in eruption. Mayakovsky is writing verse: the outlet pipe of the window ventilator sucks out the completed rhymes. Falling asleep at the cash-desk window while waiting for his fee, Mayakovsky knocks over the inkstand with his elbow; the ink suddenly becomes the Black Sea; next, the top of a palm-tree about which he is dreaming "tickles his poetic nose" and turns into the end of the charwoman's brush, and so on and so on. All these tricks are, of course, very much tied up with the special resources of the silent cinema; but their lively visual appeal, startling unexpectedness and irony, together with the feeling and humour with which they are permeated, have widened enormously the scope of the film's structure. The ending is of truly proportions:

"100. Darkness is falling.

"101. Pitch darkness.

"102. A family in the field, dreaming under an umbrella.

"103. Stars.

"104. Mayakovsky sleeping.

"105. Dream.

"106. The sun rises over the sea."

The poet's day is finished: "the Universe sleeps, its huge ear, dotted with star-ticks, laid on its paw." But now a new day begins, again demanding of him the tireless fulfilment of his duty to the people. It is a pity *How Are You?* was not accepted for production.

Mayakovsky's fight for a progressive Soviet comedy took up a great deal of his crowded time. The creator of a whole cycle of remarkable satirical poems and the author of comic and satirical plays for the theatre, Mayakovsky also worked tirelessly on the creation of a new kind of Soviet film comedy.

Among the scenarios written by Mayakovsky in the middle of the twenties, many are of a marked comic and satirical nature. They include *The Elephant and the Matchstick*, *Lyubov Shkafolyubova*, *Dekabryukhov and Oktyabryukhov*, *Comrade Kopytko*, or *Down with Fat!* and *Forget the Fireside*. If we remember that Mayakovsky's other scenarios are also satirical to a marked degree, then we begin to realise the full range of his comedy writing for the cinema.

It is also significant that Mayakovsky's scenarios are directly connected with the creation of such outstanding plays as *The Bedbug* and *The Bath House* which blazed the trail for Soviet comedy. It is well-known that his comic fairy-tale *The Bedbug* was the direct continuation and development of the basic plot themes of the scenario for *Forget the Fireside*, in which certain pivotal images and situations had already been marked out and were subsequently transferred to the comedy. *The Bath House*, a drama with circus and fireworks, is in many respects related to the scenario of *Comrade Kopytko*.

Mayakovsky's writings for the cinema, which had a distinct satirical purpose thanks to the author's own approach to the practical solution of the problems of Soviet comedy and thanks to their many important qualities, have preserved their living and abiding significance to this day. Mayakovsky's experiments in this sphere are the truly living experiments of a master-craftsman, and they also contribute to the creation of Soviet film comedy under present-day conditions.

One of the most talented of Mayakovsky's irresistibly funny scenarios is *The Elephant and the Matchstick*, based on the very limited subject of health-resort life in Yalta; but the poet was able to note and use phenomena for an amusing and yet socially relevant plot.

The other titles for this scenario are indicated in the sub-headings *Cut-throat Regime* and *How to Lose Weight*. Mayakovsky described its contents as follows: "health-resort comedy of a slimming family". All these titles and definitions are tied up with the central storyline and

highlight various aspects of its development. The Elephant is a certain overweight Ivanov, a trust manager and top-level bureaucrat, who has arrived at Yalta hoping to shed a few pounds. The Matchstick is his philistine wife, who spends her time visiting manicurists, hairdressers, stores, and so on. The scenario tells of their misadventures during their trip to the Crimea. *Cut-throat Regime* refers to the economic squeeze which hits the trust manager, and also to the diet which, combined with the economic restrictions, finally reduces the hero to normal human appearance. The whole scenario is a highly efficacious "recipe", not only of "how to lose weight", but of getting rid of big-shot philistine bureaucratic pretensions.

The trust manager is of particular interest. In several respects, he anticipates *Comrade Kopytko* (in the scenario of that name) and, later, Pobedonosikov in *The Bath House*.

Mayakovsky is not afraid to apply bold, stark colours, using visual techniques to convey the various images and hyperboles in the brilliant, witty and incisive manner so typical of him. His approach is sometimes openly farcical, but even the most incredible and ridiculous episodes are subordinated to the main objective—to make fun of a philistine and utilitarian. Here we have the tiny professor who stands on the ladder in the sleeping-compartment to listen to the manager, but hardly comes up to his armpits; then there is manager himself, who gets stuck in the compartment doorway after a huge breakfast which he hasn't had the will-power to refuse in spite of his prescribed "diet". To say nothing of the episode which follows immediately after this disobedience of doctor's orders! The trust manager thrusts his mandates under the station-master's nose, and the latter leads the trust manager to the scales. He is weighed on two sets of scales simultaneously and handed a high-speed invoice.

Almost throughout the whole steadily developing action, what might almost be called circus clowning is combined with various topically satirical episodes. The closing shots are interesting and telling in this respect. The manager's final ordeal, which comes as a climax to his slimming regime, is an encounter with a young man who is moved into his room and, with his quotations, questions, and sententiousness reduces the manager to such a state that he runs up Ai-Petri and then, to escape the youth who is pursuing him book in hand, jumps off the top of the mountain, using his unfolded umbrella as a parachute.

*The Elephant and the Matchstick*, like Mayakovsky's other scenarios, is notable for its extremely sparing use of the sub-titles obligatory in any silent film. When Mayakovsky resorts to sub-titles, they cease to be purely functional and explanatory and invariably become one of his unique and highly effective means of expression.

The image of the luckless manager in *The Elephant and the*

*Matchstick* was undoubtedly developed further in the scenario for *Comrade Kopytko, or Down with Fat!* The second title, *Down with Fat!*, is a direct echo of one of the titles for *The Elephant and the Matchstick* — *How to Lose Weight*. Here, too, the central character is a man who has been corrupted by philistinism and bureaucracy. Comrade Kopytko once fought in the Civil War, but when the action of the film commences, he has already forgotten his fighting past, has put on weight, and is now the complacent chairman of the "Fiddlesticks" Trust.

There are some scenes which, in revised form, were to be incorporated into the script of *The Bath House*. One example is the episode in which the designer brings for Kopytko's inspection some drawings of stylish furniture "with all sorts of twiddly bits" for his office. In *The Bath House*, this becomes the scene in which Belvedonsky shows some furniture to Pobedonosikov.... In the scenario, Kopytko is driven to the theatre for a clearly time-serving show tellingly entitled *The Red Kiss*. He reacts very favourably, observing: "It'll do.... Good enough as relaxation for the working masses." In *The Bath House*, this scene becomes a whole act in which Pobedonosikov, accompanied by his myrmidons, arrived at the theatre to see himself on the stage and declares that that sort of thing doesn't happen in real life.

Kopytko is portrayed more harshly than the manager in *The Elephant and the Matchstick*, in which the satirical element is milder and is somewhat overshadowed by the comic sequences. On the other hand, Kopytko is not developed into the extremely generalised and typical bureaucrat of Glavnachpups (Chief of Coordination Control) Pobedonosikov in *The Bath House*.

One crucial detail deserves mention. In the scenario, Kopytko receives notification for an army training muster and at first doesn't want to go, saying with annoyance: "In the tenth year! And me a fighting commander! Rubbish! It doesn't concern me!"

But Mayakovsky introduces into the action at this point the fantastic and somewhat grotesquely exaggerated dream of Kopytko's which is the basis of the scenario. A war has broken out and the hero finds himself in the most hopeless predicaments owing to his lack of military training. On waking up and thinking things over, Kopytko ceremoniously leaves for the muster "to the joyous applause of the entire street, from the militiaman to the urchin".

And so we see the hero at the end of the scenario justifying the slogan which gave the text its second title: *Down with Fat!* — that is, down with philistine arrogance and complacency. Comrade Kopytko is ready again to join the ranks of the soldiers to whom he once belonged in the heroic years of the Civil War.

Pobedonosikov was to be presented quite differently in *The Bath House*. Using and developing in this play certain motifs, originally sketched out in the first part of the scenario for *Comrade Kopytko*, Mayakovsky was to give them greater satirical condensation and relevance.

Mayakovsky's work for the theatre and the cinema was closely connected. This is particularly noticeable in the last scenario, *Forget the Fireside*, which was written in 1927, just before *The Bedbug*.

In this case, the common factors are incomparably more significant than those between *The Bath House* and *Comrade Kopytko*.

To counter the infiltration of decadent bourgeois-philistine attitudes among the Soviet younger generation, Mayakovsky wrote a scenario *History of a Revolver* immediately before *Forget the Fireside*. In content, it anticipates *Forget the Fireside* to some extent. The hero of *History of a Revolver*, however, is not a reformed character like Prisyarkin, the hero of *The Bedbug*, but a Komsomol who only temporarily comes under philistine influences and then finds the strength to resist them and return to the Komsomols, who are struggling for a new and socialist way of life. In certain scenes in *History of a Revolver*, however, the satirical attacks on philistinism in daily life make themselves felt in no uncertain manner.

This motif becomes central in *Forget the Fireside* and, later, in the comic fairy-tale *The Bedbug*.

The scenario for *Forget the Fireside* was based on the various items which, as Mayakovsky himself noted, came flooding in from all directions when he was busy with newspaper and propaganda work, especially for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.

The scenario for *Forget the Fireside* even included direct quotations from notes published in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* giving various details about the infiltration of philistine influences on the younger generation.

The title of the scenario is itself a parody, hinting at a film released in 1918 and entitled *Forget the Fireside—The Lights Have Gone Out*, in which the main parts were played by Vladimir Maximov and Vera Kholodnaya, both very popular at that time.

The prologue to the scenario stressed the militant intentions of the proposed film, which was to oppose the bourgeois philistine cinema.

If we compare *Forget the Fireside* with *The Bedbug*, which, in terms of ideology and plot borrowed to some extent from the scenario, we can clearly discern the special characteristics in the work of Mayakovsky, who consistently aimed at profound and biting typification.

In working out the central episodes of the scenario, Mayakovsky made unusually free use of the possibilities of the cinema. For instance, the "red wedding" scene in the scenario is no less scathing

than in the comedy to which it was subsequently transferred without any loss of the general outline. True to the specific resources of the cinema in this scenario also, Mayakovsky structures the action primarily on a very sharp montage of shots to convey the ghastly and horribly funny spectacle of the bourgeois whooping it up at their "red marriage". Purely cinematic methods are used to give a superb picture of the growing uproar which ends, as in the play, with a fire.

*Forget the Fireside* was not filmed, although it was accepted for production by Sovkino's Leningrad studios. It was, however, a vital stage in Mayakovsky's development towards one of his best plays, *The Bedbug*.

There is much of value even today in Mayakovsky's experience as a scenario writer and in his statements on cinema matters. As we have seen, whenever Mayakovsky turned to the cinema, he determinedly and consistently endeavoured to find the most effective ways of creating an artistic image charged with great ideological significance and really capable of gripping the reader's attention. At the same time, profoundly hostile to any false formalist interpretation of the specifics of the cinema, he actively fought against the underestimation of the unique expressive means inherent in the cinema as an art form, against the occasional efforts to liken the cinema to the theatre, and for a truly creative language of the cinema. Mayakovsky's original and fruitful use of images in his scenarios for the silent screen has not lost its relevance in sound cinema.

*Victor Pertsov.*      **Certain Aspects of Mayakovsky's  
Innovatory Art**

The Revolution made Mayakovsky an innovator. He progressed from the sophistication of his early and very telling pieces to a profounder simplicity. He progressed by the difficult road of quest and experiment, striving to embody in new artistic form the new content borne by the revolutionary epoch.

The talent of Mayakovsky, which, even before the October Revolution, had vividly manifested itself in his remarkable revolutionary poems, came to fruition in the land of the Soviets.

The word "involvement" is a highly appropriate term with which to explain the nature of Mayakovsky's personal experiences as a poet. He was personally involved in everything by which his people, his—as it was then—"stripling-country", and the whole world lived.

The "heart alone with the truth"—this aesthetic principle of Mayakovsky means that the borderline between lyric and epic, or even between lyric and satiric, ceased to exist for him. Everything that happens in the world also happens in the poet's heart. Mayakovsky's need for self-expression reached out to everything: for him, love and politics were equal as subjects for poetry. And even politics occupied more place than love in his verse.

Excitement is a necessary condition for creative work. It is characteristic that with Mayakovsky the need to create arose out of "contact" with entirely different "objects" or poetic themes. But this, after all, is lyrical poetry—political, socially-orientated, call it what you will—similar to that which is to be found in Mayakovsky's great predecessors, Pushkin, Nekrasov, and Blok. Similar, but not identical, because Mayakovsky's personal involvement in our history was different in kind and he himself put it as follows: "The greater the thing or event, the greater the distance you must step back. Weak artists mark time and wait for the event to retreat into the past so that they can reflect it; strong ones run ahead to get a hold of time and pull it with them."

"To get a hold of time and pull it..."—these words very accurately express the writer's socio-aesthetic position and his attitude to social life.

It seems hardly necessary to point out that Mayakovsky was the most powerful genius in Russian poetry after Pushkin, and he "pulled" time in the right direction. Mayakovsky "ran ahead" because his way was illumined by the genius of Lenin, who understood the 20th century like no one else, and "pulled" it towards the October Revolution. With Mayakovsky, the personal involvement in History fused the "common" and the "personal" and, indeed, erased the boundary between the two; in all that he did or, as he humorously put it himself: "if ever I wrote anything...", the personal was not separate from the common but was directly incorporated into it. This has not, of course, been



envisaged by any theory and is not obligatory for all artists adhering to socialist realism; but that is how it was with Mayakovsky. And it was such an integral part of his creative individuality, so inherent in the "climate" of his inner life—"on the friendliest of terms" with the October Revolution and with the new, Soviet culture—that without Mayakovsky it is no longer possible fully to understand the changes in the history of the Russian people and all the fraternal peoples.

Mayakovsky had a true and higher criterion of artistic quality and he formulated it in his *Epistle to the Proletarian Poets*:

*The Commune*  
   is my measure  
   of poetical worth.  
*Here's why*  
   the Commune  
*I think*  is so dear to me:  
   there's no higher height  
   on earth.  
   Nor deeper depth  
   in the sea.

For Mayakovsky there were no "minor" or "petty" themes if they concerned the millions of people with whom he lived as one. He naturally wrote many satirical poems indispensable to society and some of them were "direct hits". A case in point is the now famous poem *Conference-Crazy*, which caught Lenin's attention and earned his approval. It should be noted that this work was not commissioned from Mayakovsky; he submitted it to *Izvestia* personally, because he was extremely annoyed, angered and infuriated by the shortcomings in the functioning of the Soviet apparatus. To write such a poem called for real excitement—a condition similar to "lyrical excitement".

In talking to young people I have often come up against a misconception. How can Mayakovsky be considered a lyrical poet? After all, he is noisy, ecstatic, impassioned, ironic—anything you care to mention—and an orator too; but not a lyrical poet. After all, he said of himself and, please note, of time and of himself: "Listen, Comrades descendants, to the agitator, brazen-mouthed ringleader!" And, indeed, he was an agitator-poet, a controversialist, a prophet "over the mountain crests of time"; but, they ask, can he be called a lyrical poet?

It should be realised what is implied by lyricism here. Above all, of course, profoundly personal experience, "the secret of secrets" of the soul; the doubts and hopes which you would not only refuse to tell anyone else, but would not confide even in yourself, friendship,

sadness, and, naturally, the joys of remembering the past, dreams of the future and, even more important—love for nature, and, at the top of the list, love itself!

Do we find this in Mayakovsky? Yes, we do; true, not all of it; but the point is that he expressed it in a different way, and this is what we must grasp. We must, however, acknowledge the insufficiency of poetry about nature in Mayakovsky, an insufficiency which was in its way a matter of principle and to which he condemned himself quite deliberately. Here we should remember the literary and political situation in which Mayakovsky's work developed. It was necessary to rebuild a country devastated by two wars—the 1914-16 war and the Civil War. This task was posed by life itself, by the Party; but the pages of the literary magazines were crammed with superficial "landscape" lyrics. The contradiction was too glaring. Mayakovsky—the bard of socialist industrialisation, deliberately recalled, in the first version of his autobiography *I Myself*, an episode from his childhood: "Seven years old. Father has begun taking me to inspect the forests on horseback. Mountain pass. Night, mist everywhere. Couldn't even see Father. Very narrow path. Father's sleeve evidently caught on a briar. The branch lashed my cheeks and stung me. Yelping slightly, I pulled out the thorns. Pain and fog suddenly vanished. Below, in the dispersing mist, it was brighter than heaven. Electric lights. Prince Nakashidze's rivet factory. After electricity I completely lost interest in nature. It's an imperfect thing."

In contrast to Yessenin, Mayakovsky was inspired by the aesthetic appeal of technology in the service of the socialist cause. But, in extolling it, Mayakovsky, with a polemical side-swipe, rejected the aesthetics of nature as "an imperfect thing". True, in spite of these aesthetic and sometimes poetic pronouncements, his real perception of life in all its variety, including nature, proved stronger. Although he did indeed "trample on the very throat of his verse", it still burst from his lips. Here is his tribute to the wild beauty of the mountain landscape in his native Georgia, so dear to him from childhood days: he felt himself "beholden" to the "skies of Baghdad!":

*Ready to scoff,  
                                my contemptuous nose is;  
but —  
       I feel I'm beginning to falter,  
caught in the act  
                                by the sheer hypnosis  
of frolicking foam  
                                and water.*

*It's here,*  
*not in magazines*  
*I should be,*  
*ripping the strings*  
*of guitars,*  
*not for a penny-a-line,*  
*but free*  
*to roar*  
*at mountains and stars.*

Still, images of nature do not, on the whole, occupy a worthy place in Mayakovsky's poetry, and this may be considered as natural in a way.

The situation is quite different with Mayakovsky's love poetry. In his poem about Lenin, foreseeing that the champions of "pure" lyrical poetry would shriek with fury at him, he exclaimed:

*I've never been lacking*  
*in topics,*  
*you know it,*  
*but now's*  
*not the time*  
*for love-sick tattle.*  
*All*  
*my thundering power*  
*of a poet*  
*is yours,*  
*my class*  
*waging rightful battle.*

Fortunately, in total contradiction to this magnificent promise, he also wrote *It*, as he called his remarkable love poem; and such poems as *A Letter from Paris to Comrade Kostrov on the Essence and Meaning of Love*, and the earlier poem *I Love*, and, after the *Letter to Kostrov*, the *Letter to Tatyana Yakovleva*, which was not published in his lifetime, but which testified to a tremendous inner urge to speak of love.

As has already been said, Mayakovsky nearly always drew on personal experience for his poetic themes, even when these themes were political, historical, or social. The dividing line between the "epic" and the "lyrical" was completely obliterated in his verse; this also applies to love, a subject which would seem in its source to concern him only. But even here the boundary has been erased, and the poet writes "prompted by personal motifs about communal life".

Mayakovsky's love poetry has little in common with what in the history of literature is called anacreontics, with their celebration of earthly joys of love.

Love in Mayakovsky's poetry is of this earth, but one feels inclined to write Earth with a capital "E" in view of the special treatment given to the subject. In the prologue to *Mystery-Bouffe*, he declared: "We're sick of paper passions—let's live with a living wife." Earthly love was needed. Such a love that one should see one's "closest kin in all the earth", that "all the globe at the first call of 'Comrade!' should turn in glad response around". And, understandably, if the "battles of the Revolution are slightly more serious than Poltava", then "love is somewhat grander than Onegin's passion".

Mayakovsky—the "agitator, the brazen-throated ringleader"—may be called a poet of love, and all the more justifiably, the more he hated "lapdog lyricists", the more passion he put into the struggle with romance philistinism, the more resolutely he committed himself to the struggle for the new man against the old and, to a certain degree, to the struggle with himself. "What can a hulk like that be wanting? Lots!"—this is from *Cloud in Pants*, in which there were four shouts: "Down with your love", "Down with your art", "Down with your system", "Down with your religion" ....

It is a poem which reflected the poet's painful experiences when his relationship with the woman he loved ended in a tragic break-up. While writing this poem, Mayakovsky noted in a diary-letter: "...Does love exhaust everything for me? Everything, only in a different way." Characteristic here is the way the question is put: EVERYTHING and love. But what is "in a different way"? "Love is life—it's what matters most." But what is it that "matters most" and comes out of love? "From it evolve poems, and actions, and everything else. Love is the heart of everything. If the heart stops working, all the rest wilts, becomes superfluous, unnecessary. But if the heart is working, it's bound to manifest itself in all things. But if there is no 'activity', I am dead."

"There can only be ideal love. But you can't tie love down with an 'ought' or a 'mustn't'—only by free competition with the whole world."

The last sentence was to be incorporated directly into the poem *On the Essence and Meaning of Love*: "To love is to break from insomnia-torn sheets, with jealousy of Copernicus swallowing saliva; him, not the husband of Mrs. Sugar-and-Sweets regarding as your most deadly rival."

The image of jealousy of Copernicus, which may also be called a thesis of the ethics of love, is central in Mayakovsky's philosophy as a poet. One cannot be happy for oneself alone. The lucky one is bound by

love to free rivalry with the whole world, by a personal feeling with a character of exclusiveness. There is a despairing protest in the poem *Man*, written shortly before the October Revolution, when the poet complains about the impossibility of carrying out his duty to the world, the duty of love.

*I'm a captive  
no ransom can save,  
manacled by the confounded Earth.  
Everyone in my love I'd bathe,  
But its ocean is dammed in by houses  
from birth.*

The young Mayakovsky wrote about waiting for love in an early, profoundly tragic poem entitled *The Backbone Flute*. When the Revolution was accomplished, Mayakovsky began to impose restrictions on himself and refrained from writing about love. The October Revolution set the poet a task—"more necessary than bread, more thirsted for than water"—to disclose the creative and humanistic character of the proletarian revolution. This ambitious task could not be solved half-heartedly. Mayakovsky felt that it demanded all of his creative energy, with nothing held back. That is why, in the above-quoted lines from the poem about Lenin ("this is no time for love trifles...") it is impossible not to become aware of inner struggle. The poet declares: "I am going to write about that and about this." Doesn't the "attacking class" want the "ringing strength of the poet" also to be devoted to images of love, the love without which there is no life and which unites man and the world? It should be noted that in this "formulation of the question" about "love trifles", Mayakovsky was not the first in the history of Russian poetry, whose progressive representatives always gave first prominence to themes of social significance. Take Nekrasov, in whom one can find many motifs anticipating Mayakovsky, and his remarkable poem *The Poet and the Citizen*, in which Nekrasov reproachfully addresses the poet: "In times of woe, it is even more shameful to sing the beauty of the vales, the heavens and the sea, and the caresses of one's beloved...."

Mayakovsky's asceticism, reminiscent of Nekrasov's *Citizen*, was dictated by his own particular era, the historically transitional period of "war communism". Hence the contradictions which, to borrow Nekrasov's expression "in times of woe", made him feel "ashamed" of lyric poetry, justifiably pouring the vials of his wrath on "lapdog lyricism" and on curly-haired "boudoir troubadours".... Mayakovsky created a lofty and socially-orientated love poetry which did not fence off man, let alone the poet, from the world; on the contrary, it drew

him into competition with the whole world, into dialogue with cities, countries, and even ships, as is shown by the ironic and sad poem *A Chat in Odessa Harbour Between s. s. "Soviet Daghestan" and "Red Abkhazia"*.

And yet the whole poem is a meditation on love!

Particularly notable among Mayakovsky's love lyrics are the ones in which love is complicated by social conflict. His conversation with the woman in *A Letter to Tatyana Yakovleva* the poet begins with what, for him, is most important of all in his relationships with people and with the woman he loves—the "personal" fuses with the "common" into single alloy:

*In the hands' caress,  
in the lips' kiss,  
in the body's palpitation—  
it's all the same:  
I can feel no joy,  
I can feel no bliss  
if they aren't alight  
with our republic's red flame.*

In various forms, the image of woman persistently comes through in Mayakovsky's poems about Paris, and if we read them in chronological order, we see how they are connected or oriented on a lofty aesthetic ideal. Take *Beautiful Women*, one of the farewell poems written during his last visit to Paris. It is furnished with the ironic subtitle "Meditation on the Opening of the Grand Opéra". The essence of this mediation is that external beauty cannot exist without inner beauty; that an inner vacuum cannot be camouflaged by *haute couture*:

A frock-coated whopper,  
shaved and laved,  
through  
the Grand Opéra  
I strut, suave.  
Beauty by beauty  
sit in the hall.  
The scene  
seems to suit me,  
I like it all.  
Wine-glass  
waistes.  
Every nail  
glows.

Cover of the first  
edition of the  
poem *Vladimir  
Ilyich Lenin*.



Lips,  
    *so chaste,*  
rouged  
    *like a rose.*  
Eyes  
    *ringed with black*  
to set off their blue.  
Gauze  
    *on each back*  
Of salmon-pink hue.

There is another beautiful woman in the poem *A Letter from Paris to Comrade Kostrov about the Essence and Meaning of Love*. Kostrov—at that time editor of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and, it must be said, a first-class editor—who had realised Mayakovsky's true worth

Photo-copy of the  
manuscript of the  
poem Vladimir  
Ilyich Lenin.

Меня не парят и мучают слезы  
кто знает моего нежного имени  
Меня возлюбил меня нежно и нежно  
Меня возлюбил меня нежно и нежно  
Этот мой же голос мой же голос  
и другим нежным как голос взо  
но мне нежные добрые слова  
но вразуми меня вразуми меня  
Господи! Господи! Господи! Господи!  
надавай мне нежные слова  
С тобой и с тобой и с тобой и с тобой  
С тобой и с тобой и с тобой и с тобой  
Господи! Господи! Господи! Господи!  
С тобой и с тобой и с тобой и с тобой  
Каждый мой же голос мой же голос  
за то мне и другим нежным  
Меня не парят и мучают слезы  
Кровь моя в крови моей 5 лет  
Он придет ко мне ко мне ко мне  
ведет всех беззастенчиво ко мне

at a time when Mayakovsky had many enemies, sent the poet abroad on an assignment for the newspaper. In his letter in verse, Mayakovsky begs forgiveness if "part of the lines for Paris assigned will be squandered 'in petty lyrics'". The statement of the theme in the title, "About the Essence and Meaning of Love", is, as it were, a parody of a philosophical treatise. But this is justified further on: the poet expounds his own philosophy of love. The beginning is characteristic, emphasising the heroine's striking outward appearance:





**ВЛ. МАЯКОВСКИЙ**

# СОЛНЦЕ

В ГОСТЯХ

У МАЯКОВСКОГО



Всего 1000  
экз. без учета

Cover of the separate edition of the poem *An Amazing Adventure...* (New York, 1925).

*Imagine:*

*a beauty  
enters a hall  
framed  
in necklace and furs.*

But then the poet turns, in his imagination, of course, to the beautiful woman with a declaration in which he expresses his idea of "love's essence". Love for him is not measured by externals, not by "marriage", not by "the passing couple of feelings" and not even by passion. "Love's essence" is in the efflorescence of the creative power:

*To love means to rush out  
into the yard  
and right until ravening night  
with a flashing axe  
to chop faggots hard  
in a fireworks  
of manly might.  
To love is to break  
from insomnia-torn sheets,*

*with jealousy of Copernicus*  
*swallowing saliva;*  
*him,*  
*not the husband*  
*of Mrs. Sugar-and-Sweets*  
*regarding*  
*as your most deadly rival.*

Through love, man becomes creative, and in order to win one woman he is ready to do anything for anybody, to give his all to people in free competition with the whole world. This is "love's essence", according to Mayakovsky, and this is the key to his lyricism.

"...But just think, what is lyricism anyway? Just a man's public confession? Beautiful. But what do we want with the public confession of a man who cannot attract attention to himself except by wishing to make a confession in public?... Lyricism is the highest and most difficult form of art. Only first-class geniuses have the right to be lyric poets, because only a colossal personality can be of benefit to society, drawing its attention to his own private and inner life." These remarkable thoughts on lyricism by D. I. Pisarev in his article, *The Realists*, acquired fresh significance in the controversy which flared up in 1930 about Mayakovsky and the state of contemporary poetry.

Mayakovsky developed into a colossal personality who rose up with the masses during the October Revolution. "And I feel that 'I' is not enough for me," he wrote in one of his early poems. He now knew the great happiness of feeling himself a "particle" of the masses, in the vanguard of the struggle for the happiness of all mankind, so that "love might spread all over the universe". This was the distinction of the poet of the revolution, about which he spoke aloud and straight.

As the lyric poet of the Revolution and the tribune of love, he struggled for a new world, and in this struggle he became a great poet.

...Lenin's funeral was held on January 27, 1924. Many thousands of people came to the Red Square to bid farewell to him — representatives of the workers and peasants, delegations of foreign workers' organisations. The poet also was there. In his poem about Lenin he described the people's farewell to their leader. The picture he paints is also of documentary significance, for the grief was nation-wide and universal. Mayakovsky says of himself:

*Lenin's forehead*  
*was all you saw*  
*and Nadezhda Konstantinovna*  
*in a haze...,*  
*Maybe eyes less full of tears*  
*could show me more.*



Alexander  
Ushakov

## The Mayakovsky Tradition in Contemporary Soviet Poetry

The greater the distance in time between ourselves and Mayakovsky, the more obvious it becomes that he was not only one of the founders of revolutionary poetry, but a most outstanding representative of socialist culture in the highest sense of the word. Although some of his writings are marred by historically conditioned errors, the poet expressed forcefully and comprehensively the content and spiritual potentialities of the socialist revolution; he embodied in his work the magnitude of the socialist society's spiritual and moral ideals and showed what was most typical in the world outlook of the new man.

Our idea of Mayakovsky's innovatory contribution to the development of socialist culture will be inadequate if we do not take into consideration his influence on world progressive art and also on Soviet multinational poetry. Moreover, the poet's own artistic experience must be taken in its most typical and essential manifestations.

Mayakovsky aimed his poetry at the most comprehensive of social and historical reality, thereby blazing the trail for significantly expanding the possibilities of the artistic portrayal of the world and man. He was able to combine, in the flood of personal emotions and experiences, the many-sidedness of the individual "I" with the multiformity of the objective world and with its major contradictions, problems and processes. Investigating through the medium of poetry the inner world of a person, Mayakovsky isolated what this person had in common with the sentiments of the working masses. It is no accident that the poet's lyrical hero is revealed in experiences which coincide with the thoughts and feelings of the many.

The world outlook of Mayakovsky's lyrical hero does not, of course, reflect all the manifold feelings of the man who represents a new level of historical development. Furthermore, his poetry does not convey certain moods engendered by an era of upheaval in social relations. He was, for instance, far removed from the complex and dramatic feelings of the country dweller drawn into the maelstrom of social transformations, as was shown with tremendous power by Sergei Yesenin. But this, once again, only demonstrates the truth that Soviet poetry was being created by various masters among whom Mayakovsky, as a trail-blazer and pioneer, occupies the most important place.

Although Mayakovsky's lyrical poetry could not embrace all the feelings and sentiments of the new man, it is of fundamental importance that he was one of the first in Soviet poetry to predict the efflorescence of the integral human personality on the basis of struggle for the socialist rebuilding of the world. In this he saw a feasible solution to the problem of the private and the social, and in his work he reflected this as one of the most important spiritual gains of the new system. In relation to his own times, Mayakovsky as a poet epitomized the highest level of social and artistic consciousness.



Mayakovsky, with clenched fist raised (shot from a newsreel, 1929).

It would be difficult to overestimate the enormous contribution made by Mayakovsky to the development of revolutionary art, to affirming in Soviet poetry the principles of socialist realism. For many writers who accepted the Revolution, the aesthetic representation of the new social reality was a most difficult task: innovative literary forms could not emerge automatically, although life itself to some extent dictated the required rhythms and intonations. Many writers are indebted to Mayakovsky, who successfully found forms and images to express with maximum fullness the essence of the revolutionary transformations. His experience helped them to get their bearings in the complex situation of the 1920s when, alongside the all-determining develop-

ment of revolutionary art, various quasi-aesthetic trends were active, and it also helped them to understand better the meaning of their own efforts connected with the attempts to re-create new life and new social relations.

The history of Soviet literature shows that Mayakovsky's experience, along with other literary and artistic traditions, fertilised the creative thought of various national poets, and not only during the period when a new creative method was gaining ground in our art: it also played the dominant role at other stages of its development. If we take Soviet poetry as a whole, then it was undoubtedly influenced by the Mayakovsky traditions far more than by the creative work of any other poet, although the meaning and form of this influence in each specific case were different. Contact with Mayakovsky's art was usually made necessary by the endeavours of various poets to understand—through the experience of this outstanding representative of socialist realism—the most vital demands and tasks of their time, and this was naturally bound to affect their world outlook or style. Zabolotsky is a case in point.

Zabolotsky's lyrics, whose peculiarity manifested itself in the 1930s, are essentially far removed from the traditions of Mayakovsky's political poetry. They are full of intense reflections on the meaning of human life which, for the poet, is not only one of the links in the eternal cycle of nature, but is a mighty creative force passing through worlds and millennia.

But it is noteworthy that when Zabolotsky, caught up in the 1930s by the atmosphere of mass labour enthusiasm, attempted to step beyond his favourite themes and moods, he could not avoid "coming into contact" with Mayakovsky's experience. In the verses devoted to the conquering of the North, to Sedov's feat, and to the crew of the Chelyuskin, it is not difficult to notice points similar to those in Mayakovsky's works glorifying the heroic labour of the millions.

We must emphasise not only the similarity of themes and motifs in the works of the two poets, but Zabolotsky's conscious orientation—as a result of his need to understand the nature of heroic feats and mass labour heroism—on Mayakovsky's artistic experience. Noteworthy in this respect is the ending to the poem *Sedov*:

*And we shall go to distant places,  
And, should death overtake us in the snows,  
I would ask but one thing of Fate:  
That I should die as Sedov died.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Literal translation.—Tr.

Here it is important not simply to note the close resemblance between these lines and the concluding stanza of the poem *To Comrade Nette—Steamer and Man*; most important of all is that both poets are in this case proceeding virtually from the same position, proclaiming heroic deeds as a norm of human existence. That the contact with Mayakovsky's experience was not merely a brief episode in Zabolotsky's development as a poet, but had a positive effect on his world outlook is shown by his poems written in the 1940s, such as *Khramges*, *The Urals*, *Peasant Delegates*, *Bolero*, etc.

Many of the national poets who appeared on the literary scene in the middle of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, such as Gafur Gulyam, Simon Chikovani, Samed Vurgun, Mirzo Tursun-zadeh and Mikola Bazhan, were helped by Mayakovsky's innovatory experience in overcoming certain conservative factors in interpreting contemporary and historical reality and to eschew constricting, canonical verse forms and oriental exoticism. Mayakovsky's work showed them the way to social orientation, to a wide expression of the lyrical "I". In the final analysis, the Mayakovsky traditions promoted the development of socialist national art freeing it from conservative elements.

What is most characteristic and noteworthy in Soviet poetry at its present stage?

Written, as it is, in dozens of languages of the peoples of the USSR, it demonstrates, in its identity of ideological and moral aims, a great variety of national artistic forms and individual styles. Inspired by the great tasks and by the successes of communist construction, the Russian Vassily Fyodorov, the Lithuanian Eduardas Mieželaitis, the Balkar Kaisyn Kuliev, the Avar Rasul Gamzatov, the Kalmyk David Kugultinov, the Tajik Mirzo Tursun-zadeh, Mustai Karim of Bashkiria and the Byelorussian Petrus Brovka, who produced outstanding lyrical poems, work all side by side in the same poetry workshop. A significant contribution to the development of Soviet multinational poetry has been made by A. Mezhirov, M. Lukonin, M. Dudin, S. Orlov, and Ye. Vinokurov—poets of the war generation who have now reached the heights of their poetic maturity. Readers and critics alike have duly appraised the works by J. Marcinkevičius, Ye. Yevtushenko, R. Rozhdestvensky, O. Suleimenov, I. Drach, V. Tytbin, Ye. Isayev, N. Rubtsov. Many new names have appeared on the poetic scene.

With its exceptionally broad approach to the portrayal of life, the poetry of our days endeavours to paint a comprehensive picture of the contemporary world, to reveal the humanistic principles of life in our socialist society, to show how it makes progress by overcoming real-life contradictions, and to depict the complexity of contemporary

man's inner world. A close attention to moral problems is typical of contemporary poetry. It investigates man in all the complexity of the processes taking place around him, in all the multiformity of his social and spiritual life. That is why the concept "contemporary existence" in the poetry of our days, and also the lyrical hero's sphere of action and feelings, have considerably expanded. The lyrical hero is shown through his participation in politics, through the events of his personal life, and against the background of his country's history and his ties with the world of nature around him.

In the multiformity of the contemporary lyrical hero's feelings, it is not difficult to trace instances in which he is at variance with Mayakovsky's experience. Themes directly and immediately connected with politics were for Mayakovsky the main object of his poetry, and so it was typical of him that his attitude to nature should have been polemic. As Soviet poetry developed further, these motifs were fully restored to their rightful place, especially by Zabolotsky, Prokofiev, Tvardovsky, Kuliev and others. For contemporary poets, nature is not so much one link in the life cycle of eternal reproduction, as a sphere for the application of human powers where the moral essence of human deeds and behaviour manifests itself with sufficient vividness.

Substantial changes are now taking place in socially committed poetry, which is resolutely freeing itself from the declarative and rhetorical treatment of important political themes. A poem does not convince the reader if it consists solely of publicistic passion unsupported by the thoughts of poet striving to understand the complex peripeteias of our times. The passion of social commitment proves only effective when based on an artistic analysis of reality, which corresponds to the matured consciousness of people in the second half of the 20th century. Whatever the various poems may be devoted to, the inner message of the overwhelming majority consists in affirming the idea of man's responsibility for the state of the contemporary world, for its social and moral health, for its present and future. This new measure of responsibility and humanism has enormously broadened the scope of the lyrical "I".

The broad, Party interpretation of the epoch resulted in the appearance of such major works as A. Tvardovsky's *Horizons Beyond the Horizon*, E. Mieželaitis' *Man*, P. Sevak's *The Unsilenced Belfry*, Mirzo Tursun-zadeh's *The Voice of Asia*, M. Bazhan's *Flight Through the Storm*, J. Marcinkevičius' *Blood and Ashes*, and Ye. Isayev's *The Judgement of Memory*. These works, like many others, paint *in toto* an impressive picture of the contemporary world and present the typical image of Soviet man in the middle of the 20th century.



The world of contemporary poetry is also multiform in its orientation on preceding artistic traditions.

In general, when speaking of the inheritance of the classics it should be borne in mind that this cannot be treated like a mathematical problem to which there is only one correct and absolute result. "Assimilated" does not mean that some writer's achievement has become so firmly fixed in the mind of succeeding generations that it is as rigid as ferro-concrete. No viewpoint on preceding artistic traditions is historically immutable. It depends on the demands of each epoch and, to a considerable extent, is the product of these new circumstances. That is why the phenomena of art and literature, which, it seems, have been studied thoroughly and fundamentally understood so that a creative attitude to them would seem to have been finally established, again become the object of intensive reconsideration at a definite turn in historical events and in the light of new social tasks and demands. There begins a revaluation, a search for what is most consonant in them with the demands of the new age. Moreover, this revaluation is made at a new level of social consciousness. Despite all the contradictions of the process, the growth of social consciousness makes possible a deeper grasp of the essence of artistic phenomena of the past. In this respect, the attitude to the heritage of Sergei Yesenin is highly indicative.

Yesenin's sincerity in depicting experiences of a person during the break-up of the old world order and during the transition from the old to the new, seemed incompatible with the progressive consciousness. Subsequent historical experience like the growth of social consciousness itself, made it perfectly obvious that Yesenin's poetry reflected not only the complexity and the drama, but above all the inevitability of the victory gained by the new forms of national life. It became clear that Yesenin did not merely belong to a transitional era but was, like Mayakovsky, an integral part of the revolutionary epoch and socialist art.

The movement of history thus constantly stimulates a new reading of the classics. But previous artistic achievement is not simply a passive object of observation and reflection. Seen and grasped afresh in new historical circumstances, it promotes, in its turn, a deeper understanding of the new conditions, the new epoch.

Of the most outstanding poets of the past, whose experience today fertilises our poetic thought, the first names that come to mind are Yesenin, Blok and Pasternak, and of the 19th-century classical poets — Nekrasov and, of course, Pushkin, whose role in contemporary spiritual life is still steadily growing. That is why quite often in the work of this or that poet it is not difficult to find echoes of various poetic systems and the traces of various artistic

phenomena. Mayakovsky holds a special place in the system of these traditions.

The continuation of the Mayakovsky traditions in present-day conditions does not simply consist in repeating his experience, much less in imitating the intonational structure of his verse. Moreover, some poets tell that they arrive at an understanding of all the contradictoriness of the contemporary world and all the complexity of human existence without being influenced by the great poet of the Revolution.

This "alienation" from Mayakovsky is purely external in character; it is mainly stylistic as a phenomenon, not ideological or aesthetic.

It may be that the subjective need of some poets to assimilate Mayakovsky's experience has diminished, but this does not mean that the objective impact of his tradition on the development of Soviet poetry has weakened. If this or that poet approaches the poetic embodiment of the most vital problems of his time, while bypassing, as he imagines, the artistic achievements of Mayakovsky, this does not mean that he is entirely independent of the traditions established by the great poet of the Revolution. The fact of the matter is that Mayakovsky's heritage has become an integral part of the present-day ideological and artistic atmosphere, which is fertilising the practice of a creative art.

It has already been said that the manner of portraying contemporary reality and the human personality has become more complex. Poetry's chief task is now to embody the fullness of experiences of a person, his openness and his unity with society and nature. Poetry shows the enrichment of man's spiritual world in conformity with increased demands and wider possibilities for revealing the human personality in the era of the developed socialism.

Although, in the works of contemporary writers, the picture of the world looks more complex than in Mayakovsky's verse, and although man is shown incomparably richer in his range of feelings, there are no contradictions between the experience of contemporary poetry and the traditions established by the great poet of the Revolution. The connection between poetry and the solution of the fundamental tasks of its time, together with the endeavour to convey the most characteristic moods and feelings of this time, bring poetry into line with the traditions bequeathed by Mayakovsky. The continuity of his heritage lies in the poetic portrayal of the life of the developed socialist society in all its many aspects and in its most fundamentally typical manifestations. This is the road which the best of our poetry is following today. To continue in the Mayakovsky traditions means to look at our reality from the ideological and moral vantage point of a contemporary world understanding which corresponds to the level of the new tasks of communist construction. Mayakovsky's traditions are

primarily being carried on not by those poets who merely borrow certain features of his art, but by those who succeed in conveying to the reader the great truth of our times. From this point of view, Alexander Tvardovsky, for instance, is incomparably closer to Mayakovsky than many other poets whose style is reminiscent of his.

It should, however, be borne in mind that even when some poets show in their writing a continuity of the Mayakovsky traditions, they may also, in certain aspects of their work, come into conflict with his artistic experience.

Where poetry eschews broad ideological and aesthetic criteria, it departs from Mayakovsky's traditions. As soon as the link between poetry and life weakens, as soon as it circumvents the most urgent problems of the time and detaches itself from the major interests and aspirations of man, there is an immediate break with Mayakovsky's traditions.

Poetry, like a seismograph, sensitively records the various trends and moods of contemporary life. And, of course, by far not everything that it registers corresponds to the level of the advanced social consciousness. This also fully applies to the poetry written in the last ten or fifteen years.

While demonstrating its accuracy in describing the most varied feelings, poetry often proves inadequate to reveal them as the most characteristic aspects of inner life. Not infrequently the attention of poets is attracted by what is petty and of little interest in human existence.

Some poets are inclined to exaggerate the negative consequences of the scientific and technological revolution, which they see in a non-social aspect.

The complex and contradictory processes accompanying the invasion of all spheres of life by the scientific and technological revolution do indeed create poles of repulsion. This tendency towards "repulsion" makes itself felt in poetry idealising the "natural" life and the patriarchal virtues of rural existence.

A deeper preoccupation with the inner world of man can also, in some works, have dubious consequences, in the sense that tracing the experiences of a certain personality can result in a withdrawn, self-sufficient poem with no relevance to the surrounding social world. All this undoubtedly runs counter to Mayakovsky's militant and socially-orientated poetry.

Even so, despite these shortcomings which testify to certain contradictions in the development of contemporary poetry, the positive processes in it undoubtedly play a major part. Its attention is concentrated on the portrayal of the most vital problems of our life. Carrying Mayakovsky's traditions further, contemporary poetry

strives to depict in all their fullness the real humanistic aspects of socialism, the experiences of the human personality in their totality. Its openness to the world, life, society, and people is becoming the dominant note of poetry; it strives for the manifold and comprehensive portrayal of reality and man.

The present stage of spiritual and cultural life is notable for the complexity, depth and multiformity of the social and artistic consciousness. The extraordinary variety of forms in creative art, which combines in a certain unity the living traditions of the multinational classics and the search for innovation, gives grounds for believing that the present stage in the development of Soviet poetry may be regarded as heralding a new upsurge in the art of poetry.

Probably no poet has exerted so decisive and direct an influence on the progressive poetry of the world as Mayakovsky. "A powerful new talent rushed over from the East like a hurricane and scattered the old rhythms and images as no poet had ever dared to do before," recalled Johannes Becher.<sup>1</sup> Mayakovsky was a truly gigantic personality, a poet of enormous talent. But his world fame cannot be explained by greatness of talent alone. Becher was right to stress that "only he can be the poet of an epoch like Mayakovsky, who combines in himself the vital forces of his era in all their depth and many-sidedness".

Unprecedented social changes transformed the spiritual life of the 20th century and introduced new features into literature. The demands of the time resounded in Mayakovsky's poetry with the greatest fullness and strength, and earlier than in that of any other poet. With the sensitivity of genius, he detected the subterranean shocks of history, the great changes which were coming to a head deep in reality itself.

The complex dialectics of life manifested itself in the fact, strange though it might seem at first glance, that the poetry of as original, individual and inimitable a writer as Mayakovsky became the most pure and classical expression of the general laws of the epoch. Quite incomparable and out-of-the-ordinary, he was destined to embody in his work with almost concrete vividness the leading trends in the development of 20th-century progressive poetry. Mayakovsky's twelve to thirteen creative years after the October Revolution (1917-1930), typify in condensed form the history of the development of world poetry over several decades up to the present time.

In this article, which naturally does not claim to deal with every aspect of so wide and complex a problem as Mayakovsky's place in the history of world poetry, we would like to touch on one or two characteristic features of his creative development which shows a far from fortuitous resemblance to that of other major 20th-century lyrical poets.

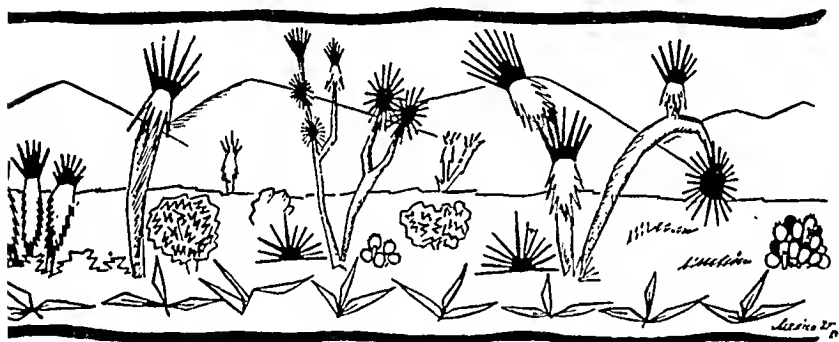
This resemblance is all the more significant in that it is due not so much to borrowing and imitation (although it would be wrong to deny Mayakovsky's tremendous influence on world poetry), as to the unity of the inner laws of development in historically similar conditions, a unity which makes itself known "despite" the uniqueness of dissimilar creative personalities.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Becher, "Discoverer of the World", *Pravda*, April 14, 1940.



Рис. В.Я. Маяковского.



Drawings by Mayakovsky in one of his notebooks (1925).

## 1

Mayakovsky was above all a lyrical poet by virtue of his poetic talent and his disposition. His poems nearly always had his own personal experience as their subject matter. The gift of "transformation" was alien to him; he could only write about what he, Mayakovsky, was excited by or was experiencing. His work always has what Belinsky considered the most important attribute of lyrical poetry: "Here, the personality of the poet is seen in the foreground, and only through it do we accept and understand everything."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> V. G. Belinsky, *Collected Works*, Russ. Ed., Vol. V, Moscow, 1954, p. 9.

Poster advertising  
a public appear-  
ance by Maya-  
kovsky in  
Paris (1925).

## Объединение Студентов СССР в Париже

Четверг 12-го Ноября 1925 г.

В помещении Institut Océanographique

192, rue Saint-Jacques, Paris (Guy-Lussac - St-Jacques)

Впервые в Париже выступит проездом из Мексики  
и Соединенных Штатов в СССР

поэт

## Владимир Владимирович МАЯКОВСКИЙ

I

"Там и у нас"

(Доклад об искусстве)

II

Стихи о Мексике

- |                        |                          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1) Испания             | 4) Гой быков             |
| 2) Атлантический океан | 5) Лопина Эсмеранда Хуан |
| 3) Гавана              | де Лопец                 |

III

Стихи о Соединенных Штатах

- |                        |                     |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1) Небоскреб в разрезе | 3) Кемп Илт Гедлге  |
| 2) Парштия и Вульворт  | 4) Бруклинский мост |
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IV

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ПО ОКОНЧАНИИ ОТВЕТ НА ЗАПИСКИ

Билеты по 5, 3 и 2 франка можно получить в Студенческом Объединении  
22, Avenue de l'Observatoire, в Союзе Возвращения на Родину, 4, rue  
Diderot, в Союзе Русских Рабочих, 11, rue Vergatoirix и в Советском  
Генеральном Консульстве, 12, rue Le Vettier.

Начало речи в 8 час. веч.

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Начало речи в 8 час. веч.

The theme of love, the "prima donna" of lyrical poetry, occupies an enormous place in Mayakovsky's pre-October and post-October works.

By virtue of his talents and inner disposition, however, Mayakovsky was a man who was vitally and inseparably linked with the surrounding world, with people. He exemplified most fully Lev Tolstoy's idea that "man, living in this world, must ... realise himself to be a member of

Poster advertising an appearance by Mayakovsky in the Polytechnical Museum (1925).

СБОРТА 19 ДЕКАБРЯ

**ПОЛИТЕХНИЧЕСКИЙ МУЗЕЙ**  
(УЛАДОВСКИЙ ДР., 4)

СООБОТКОС  
**2 БОЛЬШОЙ ВЕЧЕР**  
КУРТОБЕЖИ И КУРТОБЕЖИ

СБОРТА 19 ДЕКАБРЯ

ПОЭТА **ВЛАДИМИРА**  
**МАЯКОВСКОГО**

И ДОКЛАД  
**ДИРИЖЕР ТРЕХ АМЕРИК**  
(С. Ш. С. А.)

ТЕМЫ: Бог доллар — доллар дух святой. Кино-Чаплин, золотая горячка, горничная в 15 тысяч в неделю. Ньюйоркский поэтический Канотоп. Фото-монтаж князя Бориса. Принцесса Сирила. Змеиные яйца в Москве. Неподкупность продажных газет. Негритянский великий поэт А. С. Пушкин. Форд, как он есть. Американские радиоры о Форде. Приключения мистера Броунинга. Какая Америка интересней — моя или всамделешая. Горькая и Королевство об Америке и С. Ш. С. А.

**II. СТИХИ и ПОЭМЫ**  
О МЕКСИКЕ, АМЕРИКЕ, АТОКЕАНЕ, ИСПАНИИ И ФРАНЦИИ.

1. Свобода	2. Св. Платон	3. Голубчик	4. Буржуазный мост	5. Путь к Востку
6. Мертвотуп	7. Мертвотуп	8. Мертвотуп	9. Мертвотуп	10. Мертвотуп

ПОСЛЕ ДОКЛАДА ОТВЕТ НА ЗАПИСКИ.

**Начало в 8 ЧАС. ВЕЧ.**

Билеты проданы в бюро билетного сбора в Петербургский мост (Петровский мост) и в 12 до 1 час вечера.

Начало в 8 ЧАС. ВЕЧ.

all mankind"<sup>1</sup>, "so that ... anything new he (the writer — F. P.) sees should be important to people, he must not live selfishly, but must take part in the common life of mankind."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most typical poetic image in Mayakovsky's works is the generalised image of the universe, of the "whole earth". Born in the early poems, this image, as it is developed, actually permeates the whole of his work: "The Universe sleeps, its huge ear, dotted with star-ticks, laid on its paw"—in *Cloud in Pants*; Earth with "the wrinkles of trenches" on its brow, its head "dazed with smoke and battle", its arms thrust in despair behind its "dishevelled hair"—in *War*

<sup>1</sup> L. N. Tolstoy, *Collected Works*, Anniversary Edition, Vol. LXXII, Moscow and Leningrad, 1933, p. 416.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Vol. XXX, p. 224.



and Peace; "The ball of Earth" riveted, like shackles, to Man's legs—in the poem *Man*; "The entire Universe" as the scene of action—in *Mystery-Bouffe*; the image of the "whole earth" sleepless during the days of the sad farewell to Lenin; the sleeping world in *A Chat in Odessa Harbour...* which has shed "a giant tear of blue" (i.e. the Black Sea), and many others, up to the address to the Universe in the lyrical passages of the last poem....

Each of these images is the artistic expression of what was most essential in Mayakovsky, that is, the striving to encompass the whole world in thought, an obsessive concern with the fate of the world.

Mayakovsky felt a permanent responsibility for the destiny of all people: not only those near to him, but those he did not know and had never seen:

*A poet,  
I've erased all distinction  
between my own face  
and the faces of others.*

His greatest dream was of a rational, truly human social set-up, of universal human happiness and unity so as "to live in one community, not in a world parcelled into Latvias and Russias".

The theme of a world community allies Mayakovsky with many of the world's progressive writers. The very title of Pablo Neruda's book, *Canto General*, reflects a feeling close to Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky's striving to find words and images to express the thoughts and feelings of the masses, of the "tongueless street" inevitably suggests Broniewski's poem *For Whom Is Poetry?*, in which he describes his urge to express the feelings of the millions. We can also note some very close parallel images. Compare, for instance, these lines from Mayakovsky's poem *War and Peace*:

*My huge eyes  
cathedral-doors open to all.  
People —  
loved,  
unloved,  
known,  
and unknown,  
in an endless procession pour into my soul.*

with those from Louis Aragon's *The Poets*:

*J'ouvre mon ventre et mon poème  
Entrez dans mon antre et mon Louvre  
Voici ma plaie et le Saint-Chrême  
Voici mon chant que je découvre  
Entrez avec moi dans moi-même.<sup>1</sup>*

And when Mayakovsky speaks about a language "belonging to all peoples" (the tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovsky*), one is reminded of the lines from Eluard's poem at the beginning of his collection *Cours naturel*: "Nous parlerons ensemble un langage sensible."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, two contradictory tendencies collide in Mayakovsky's poetry—the intimacy of lyrical emotions and breadth of life's scope.

We know now, many years later, that this collision was fruitful and that it led to an extraordinary widening of the bounds of lyrical verse, which gradually took to its bosom the vast world of the people's life. The Revolution, the heroic building of a new reality, the history being enthusiastically made by the people with their own hands—these became the poet's personal theme.

"Breakthroughs" of the lyrical element into the social had taken place before Mayakovsky; but these had been more or less sporadic and had never been as forceful, fundamental and all-embracing.

"The Revolution should be given names such as people give their beloved on their first day together!" These words are a kind of formula, an image to express the inner, uniquely personal interpretation to which, in Mayakovsky's poetry, social and political themes were subjected. As is rightly said in one study: "The best key to an understanding of Mayakovsky's poetry is the realisation that in everything he wrote, he was, above all, a lyrical poet of genius. Man's daily actions are mirrored in his great I, like the sun in a drop of water. His work is the poetic autobiography of a giant."<sup>3</sup>

But the creation of a new kind of lyrical poetry, which expressed the complex soul of 20th-century man, was not a simple or direct matter. It was a difficult process, not "programmed in advance", but linked with the search for the truth, with the "journey into the unknown". It was, moreover, a multi-stage process ascending in a spiral, in which the dialectics of negation led, in the final analysis, to a new synthesis—the higher synthesis of the personal and the social.

<sup>1</sup> Louis Aragon, *Les Poètes, poème, prologue*, Paris, 1960, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Eluard, *Choix de poèmes*, Moscou, 1958, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Anatol Stern, "Wounded by Love", *Rainbow* No. 12, 1965, p. 162.

In its main features, this process was common to the progressive poetry of many countries, but in Mayakovsky's it is seen in particularly intense and concentrated form during the brief period of his post-October work, whereas in Western poetry it was more diffuse.

The beginning of this process is linked with the rejection of lyrical poetry in general as an expression of personal feelings. "We launched more than one bayonet attack on lyrical poetry," wrote Mayakovsky in the poem *Jubilee*. To a greater or lesser extent, such "attacks" were characteristic of the whole front of progressive poetry at its initial stage. "Dreams, fancies—flowers, roses" evoked Mayakovsky's withering scorn. Similar examples are to be found in abundance in the poetry of other countries. Take, for example, Broniewski's programmatic poem *Poetry*, Brecht's poem *Bad Times for Poetry* (*Schlechte Zeit für Lyrik*) or Pablo Neruda's poem *Explico Algunas Cosas*:

*Preguntaréis: Y dónde están las lilas?  
Y la metafísica cubierta de amapolas?  
Y la lluvia que a menudo golpeaba  
sus palabras llenándolas  
de agujeros y pájaros?  
Os voy a contar todo lo que me pasa.*

*Bandidos con aviones y con moros,  
bandidos con sortijas y duquesas,  
bandidos con frailes negros bendiciendo  
venían por el cielo a matar niños  
y por las calles la sangre de los niños  
corría simplemente, como sangre de niños.<sup>1</sup>*

The passionate feeling of artists who have not hesitated to make their choice, firmly preferring the universally significant to the personal and private, is expressed with tremendous force in the generalised and concentrated imagery of Eluard's poem *A Critique of Poetry* (*Critique de la poésie*) (1932):

*C'est entendu je hais le règne des bourgeois  
Le règne des flics et des prêtres  
Mais je hais plus encore l'homme qui ne le hait pas  
Comme moi  
De toutes ses forces.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Pablo Neruda, *Obras Completas*, Buenos Aires, 1957, pp. 233, 235

*Je crache à la face de l'homme plus petit que nature  
Qui à tous mes poèmes ne préfère pas cette Critique  
de la poésie.<sup>1</sup>*

As in Brecht's *Bad Times for Poetry*, and Eluard's *A Critique of Poetry*, "poetry" and "intimate lyrical poetry" are seen as identical<sup>2</sup>, and writing which serves topical demands and directly intrudes into the social conflicts of the time is considered as being *outside the bounds of poetry*. So far, for Eluard, forms of poetry which could incorporate the struggle with the despicable realm of police informers and priests, virtually do not exist. Poetry is a reserve of the beautiful; it is the domain of refined feelings and experiences and it gives no access to the dirt of life. A new conception of poetry and its potentialities was to come to Eluard later, when its future paths and destinies were more clearly discernible. But in the meantime, the poet heroically sacrificed his exquisite poetry, rating it much inferior to the cry expressing violent hatred for the repulsive kingdom of the bourgeoisie, police informers, and priests. And the passion behind that cry expresses the explosive force of Eluard's *critique of poetry*, equivalent to Mayakovsky's *attacks* on it.

Referring to the *Critique of Poetry*, Louis Aragon noted: "This reassessment of one's poetry in the light of the class struggle is a natural phenomenon for poets at a certain stage of their creative path...."<sup>3</sup>

The term "lyrical poetry" has always been associated with the profoundly personal sphere of human life. Only a sense of poetic non-engagement with the common could have produced Nekrasov's famous lines: "Struggle would not let me be a poet. Songs prevented me from being a fighter."

However, the "critique of lyricism" has never yet become an open struggle with it, had never gone to such extremes, had never been so uncompromisingly straightforward as during the emergence of 20th-century progressive poetry, which strove for *action* with its whole being:

<sup>1</sup> Paul Eluard, *Choix de poèmes*, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the terms "lyrical poetry" and "poetry" were, for Mayakovsky, identical more often than not. Cf.: "We launched more than one bayonet attack on *lyrical poetry*.... But *poetry* is the most nauseating stuff: it exists, but you can't make head or tail of it" (*Jubilee*). This is evidently to be explained by the fact that lyrical poetry was for him, to quote Belinsky, the "poetry of poetry".

<sup>3</sup> Louis Aragon, *Choix de poèmes*. Moscou, 1959, p. 234.

*Et les poètes sidérés ont répété l'appel aux armes  
L'appel à la justice à la fraternité.*

*Et les poètes ont essayé  
De se régler sur leurs semblables.*

wrote Eluard in *Poets I Have Known* (*Les poètes que j'ai connus*).<sup>1</sup>

According to the poet who had embarked on the untrodden path of creating a new reality, word must above all become deed. "Ring out word, that becomes deed! The word must act!" wrote Becher.<sup>2</sup>

The striving for the unity of art and reality swept over, though not simultaneously, the whole progressive poetry front. Born in the work of Mayakovsky and the Soviet poets of the 1920s, it consolidated its positions in European poetry somewhat later, in the 1930s and 1940s. The enthusiasm of the struggle and of the social transformation of reality grew actively at tense and critical times for the capitalist countries: in the hectic atmosphere of nazism's rise in Germany, in the tragic times of the fascist intervention in Spain, and during the heroic French Resistance.

However, the proclamation of the effectiveness and potency of words did not of itself create a new kind of poetry. Declarations and slogans had to be put into practice. Ahead lay an untrodden road demanding the expenditure of effort, a road that had in store finds and revelations, and also losses, which poetry recouped as it moved forward. The truth had to be fought for and was the result of an intensive quest and the overcoming of extremes, one-sidedness, and temporary blunders.

One-sidedness, indeed, was typical of the first step taken by progressive poetry, which aspired to unity of word and action. Recoiling from the "non-engagement" of decadent art, which claimed that poetry had no goal outside itself, progressive poetry flew to the other extreme, proclaiming that its agitational forms were the most important and even the only kind of art. Cheek by jowl with this extreme went another: the aesthetic function of art and its ability to give pleasure were thrown into doubt and frequently denied. This property of art seemed to contradict its efficacy. In giving people pleasure, in adding colour to their unsightly lives, it became, as it were, an element of ordinary everyday life, a kind of refined entertainment devoid of all practical significance. In this way, from a weapon art turned into a gewgaw, and the poet from a tribune and creator of

<sup>1</sup> Paul Eluard, *Choix de poèmes*, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> See: *The Poetry of Socialism*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1969, p. 134.

socially useful values—into an entertainer for philistines in their leisure hours.

In the middle and towards the end of the 1920s, and sometimes afterwards, Brecht saw the significance of poetry above all in "information": he sought ways and means for the "practical application" of lyrical verse, regarding utility and productivity as the main criteria of creative art. In the 1930s, Becher, along with other revolutionary German poets, created an art directly addressed to the masses and very reminiscent of Mayakovsky's *Windows of ROSTA*. Agitatory poetry featured significantly in the work of the Polish revolutionary poets Stande and Wandurski. The Czech poet Stanislav Neumann attached great importance to it, and so did Christo Smirnenski in Bulgaria. Even as exquisite a lyrical poet as Eluard saw it as poetry's main line during the occupation years in France.

To Mayakovsky, the search for forms of open incursion into life and a distrust of poetry's aesthetic function were naturally combined with a warily hostile attitude to lyric verse which he saw as a genre substituting contemplation for action and breeding renunciation and withdrawal. "The inactive lyricist corrupts the soul," he affirmed. Contemplation, if not translated into deed, was rejected out of hand:

*Not for me to tinker  
with alliterative trinkets,  
for the god of poetry with images-icons.*

.....  
*I've been growing my brains for 28 years  
Not to sniffle at roses.  
But to invent them.*

Not wanting to be "plucked like a flower in the meadow after a hard day's work", and regarding himself as a "happiness factory", Mayakovsky heatedly contrasted lyrical verse detached from the world with a poetry which was instrumental in achieving some intervention in life, however slight.

In writing advertisements, production and agitation posters, and verse for the newspapers, that is, in fulfilling the "social demand", Mayakovsky found a form of poetic creation which had a direct and immediate impact on reality and openly intruded into life.

And yet such poetic activity alone could not satisfy Mayakovsky. The lyrical side of him demanded freer and wider expression. If agitation production poetry was a line which had, in a manner of speaking, "broken with lyrical verse" and veered away, the process of "repressing" intimate lyric in Mayakovsky's work nevertheless began on lyrical soil.

The complexity of this process and the agonies of the truth experienced by the poet are reflected in the poem II.

The truth is that, despite the relative tone of the declamatory, "overheating" lyrical verse, Mayakovsky's attitude to it was neither simple nor unequivocal. His criticism of lyrical poetry was to a large extent self-criticism, and the arena of the struggle with it was in his own soul. A passionate search for a way out, for harmony and for an internal world outlook are what make Mayakovsky's poem so original.

It opens with the powerful ring of the main theme of world lyrical poetry—that of "love, a love so high-powered that it destroys the telephone network and causes an earthquake. The lyrical hero of the poem cannot, and will not, free himself from this "horrible love", "horrible, not too, over horrible, not to dare".

And now this basic theme of intimate lyrical verse that "threw" the poet's "loose into a notebook and ordered: "Scrabble!", sent "affairs and people scattering", gripped him "like a thing by the throat", "made of others remote and alone" and "assured unbridled pre-eminence".

However paradoxical it may seem at first glance, it is this intimate, subjective, narrowly personal theme, a source of contradictions driving the poet much angrier, that saved him in the end by offering a solution.

*Love threw*

*loose my days:*

*and told: "Run, who  
your steps!*

*in the darkness around,*

*breath*

*and alone!"*

Love "threw loose my days", but it also made the poet "run with his eyes" in the darkness around in search of light and meaning...

The source of the contradictions lies in the fact that the hero's enormous life of many years' standing cannot be reconciled with the narrow framework of daily existence, with life in the name of personal love only. It demands a life commensurate with itself and expression beyond of life's. And so the hero is driven to anguished yearnings for a way out, to feverish and convulsive thinking, to prayers for salvation, to a way out in death and it must be seen, nevertheless. The theme of lofty thought without compromise is clearly heard in the poem:

*His death reached him in the storm*

*and crossed.*

*all ballast overboard*  
*my ship tosses.*  
*Ten times be confounded,*  
*emptied-out lightness!*

The centre of the conflict in the poem is not between the hero and the heroine, but between the tiny personal world and the great world of human society. Familial, amorous, consanguineous and friendly ties—in sum, the whole world of the personal—are seen in the poem as shallow, as breaking life up into little closed cells (in the rough copy of the poem: “The whole world has been split up by the family into little cells”). The poet dreams of all mankind as one family.

The contradictions between the personal and the social do not find a harmonious solution in the present. Mayakovsky postpones the reconciliation of these antagonistic principles until the 30th century. But, as the poem develops, the personal theme is progressively superseded by the social one. Yearning for happiness and the pain of jealousy are gradually overshadowed by the heroic theme of the renunciation of personal happiness for the happiness of all. The feeling which rises dominant over all the others proves to be a keen awareness that it is absolutely impossible to be happy when one is limited to the confines of one's own house and one's own personal destiny:

*What's the use*  
*if you*  
*alone were successful?*

In renouncing happiness for himself, the poet dreams that “love might spread all over the universe”. Only at the end of the poem, when the word “love” has been filled with a new and bigger meaning, does the poet write it out in full. He purposely avoided doing this in the title and in the introductory chapter where, although suggested by the rhyme with “above”, it is represented by a corresponding number of dots.

At the end of the poem, instead of a “bear” tormented by the pangs of jealousy, we find a man who wants to embrace the whole world.

All the way through *It* affirms that personal happiness is not enough for the new man; he needs the happiness of all mankind. The poem tells how the social, the common, became what is closest and most personal for the hero; in it the *personal perception of the social* was arrived at through suffering. It was in the poem's conclusions, reached in this way, that the possibility arose of lyrically mastering themes with great



social and political import. It was no accident that *It* was followed by the poem about Lenin, in which the scope of lyrical mastery reaches out to the frontiers of the Universe and the hero of the poem is called to fulfil the dream of world-wide human happiness.

A theory of Roman Jakobson's has gained considerable ground among foreign students of Mayakovsky. According to this theory there was a periodic alternation between lyrical and political themes in his verse, each obliterating and refuting, as it were, the other: from time to time, Mayakovsky "doused the sparks of lyrical fire" and, "trampling on the very throat of his verse", turned to politics. This theory of the "two Mayakovskys", one lyrical, the other political, has been taken up by E. Muchnik, Edward Brown, Marc Slonim, and others.

Referring to *It* and *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*, Jakobson claims: "For the third time, a political poem comes to take over from personal lyrics."<sup>1</sup>

In point of fact, the poem about Lenin continued and developed at a new stage the great dialogue with himself and his times which had been started in *It*. It should be emphasised that Mayakovsky's mature work in its fundamental and most significant specimens can be likened to an *uninterrupted, inexhaustible lyrical torrent* which, with growing impetus, cut increasingly wider channels for itself, capturing more and more territory in its course and finally plunging into the ocean of the universal.

The process of widening the scope of the personal lyrical poetry and of mastering the social side of life was characteristic of all progressive poetry. The awareness of oneself as part to the history that one was making with one's own hands and personal involvement in what was happening in the great world outside were bound to become the basis of the qualitative shift which took place in the lyrical treatment of reality. Indeed, the same attitude on the part of those who were actively contributing to the historical process and building the new life, was, as we know, a starting point for agitation poetry also; but here it was brought about by other means. After lyrical poetry had, to a considerable extent, deprived agitation verse of its monopoly over political themes, the latter's significance narrowed and the genre ended up on the periphery.

Eluard also went through a period of mastering the complexities of handling the social aspects of life in terms of lyrical poetry. The successive stages of this process are recorded in the second *Critique of Poetry* (*Critique de la poésie, II*) (1942) and in the poem entitled *Poetry Must Have the Practical Truth as Its Goal* (*La poésie doit avoir pour but la vérité pratique*) (1948).

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<sup>1</sup> *Russian Literary Archives*, New York, 1956, p. 182.

For Eluard *Critique of Poetry* meant, as for Mayakovsky, self-criticism (remember: "I spit in the face of the curs who do not prefer this critique of poetry to *all my verse!*").

The second *Critique of Poetry* came ten years after the first, in which Eluard had renounced and reviled the poetic dreams of his exquisite lyrical poetry.

The personal lyrics are now rehabilitated. It is heard here freely and fluently in all its sophisticated imagery. But the significance of this remarkably profound poem does not end here. It is original in that lines of truly tragic content, austere and simple in their stark essence are interpolated into passages of triumphant lyricism. They end, or, to be more precise, are wedged in between each stanza: "Garcia Lorca was executed", "Saint-Pol Roux was executed, his daughter was murdered", "Decour was executed".<sup>1</sup> The last sentence ends the poem.

Eluard seems to be trying to combine lyrical poetry with political life, but the politics haven't "fitted" into the lyrical poetry which has proved to be unable to accept them organically. This is the basis of the criticism to which Eluard now subjects poetry.

Through this complex interweaving of the tender and lofty lyricism, to which the poet aspires despite the "city of ice" and the "walls with their dead echo", with the tragic reality which, for all its meaning and for the force of the unresolved contradiction, cannot be fitted into lyrical verse, Eluard is crying out for harmony between poetry and reality. But the world is tragically split and only partly accessible to poetry.

*Poetry Must Have the Practical Truth as Its Goal*—such is Eluard's way of announcing a new approach to lyrical poetry. Politics have gone here into lyrical verse as a legitimate resident. Lines in which the poet speaks of the necessity to "explain the world and refashion it", of the struggle, and of his brethren who "are creating the light", are on neighbourly terms with the lyrical "old inhabitants"—"the sun set in the forest", "the languour of love" and so on.

The dedication of the poem reads: "To my exacting friends"—those admirers of Eluard's poetry who could not accept his new political themes:

*Si je vous dis que dans le golfe d'une source  
Tourne la clé d'un fleuve entrouvrant la verdure  
Vous me croyez encore plus vous comprenez  
Mais si je chante sans détours ma rue entière*

<sup>1</sup> Paul Eluard, *Choix de poèmes*, p. 111.

*Et mon pays entier comme une rue sans fin  
Vous ne me croyez plus vous allez au désert.<sup>1</sup>*

Louis Aragon subtly observed that the third "critique of poetry" no longer had that title and that this was no accident: "...Eluard has by-passed this stage of creative development and, carrying criticism beyond the bounds of poetic craftsmanship, turns it on the poets themselves, on his brother-enemies, on his "exacting friends"<sup>2</sup>.

Eluard included the poem in his cycle *Poèmes politiques* (1948), which opens with a confessional article "From one man's horizon to all men's horizon". For Eluard now "the only refuge possible is the whole world"<sup>3</sup>. The poet speaks for the many, for the people:

*Et les mêmes espoirs d'un peu moins de malheur  
Mêmes amours aussi mon cœur est avec eux  
Mon cœur est tout entier dans leur cœur innocent  
Je le sais je parle pour eux<sup>4</sup>.*

Needless to say, the stages in the development of lyrical poetry in its essentials were dictated by the development of life itself which, by dialectical contradiction, disclosed the possibilities inherent in it; but each poet had his own "key" to the mysteries of life. Along the complex road travelled by Eluard, from surrealist mystification and seclusion to lyrical poetry of great social significance, the guiding principle for his poetic thought, as with Mayakovsky, was to a marked degree love, the core of his lyrical poetry. But love led him along a somewhat different path. Eluard never sacrificed his love for the universal triumph of love, as did Mayakovsky in *It*, although he too feared that happiness in love might insulate from the world and consequently he said: "Love is man incomplete" ("L'amour s'est l'homme inachevé").<sup>5</sup> But in psychological terms, the road to universal happiness lay, for Eluard, through the happiness and love of two people. To him the possibility of the harmonious union of two souls was a pledge that universal unity and happiness were also possible. The happiness of love contained the seeds of the need for universal happiness and of active struggle for it:

<sup>1</sup> Paul Eluard, *Choix de poèmes*, pp. 85-86.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Aragon, *Collected Works* in eleven volumes, Russ. Ed., Vol. X, p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> *Social Poetry from France*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1955, p. 316.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Eluard, *Choix de poèmes*, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> From *History of French Literature*, Russ. Ed., Vol. IV, Moscow, 1963, p. 433.

*C'est la première lumière  
Dans la nuit des malheureux  
Lumière toujours première  
Toujours parfaite  
Lumière de relation  
Ronde de plus en plus souple  
Etendue et animée  
Graine et fleur et fruit et graine  
Et je t'aime finit bien  
Pour les hommes de demain.<sup>1</sup>*

It is natural that Eluard should have arrived by a more direct road at the discoveries which, for Mayakovsky, demanded sacrifice and the courage of self-denial in the early stages. Mayakovsky was a trail-blazer: he was destined to clear the way for the subsequent development of poetry. Furthermore, the fierceness of the revolutionary battles in the 1920s constantly demanded the solution of an "either-or" dilemma, and an immediate solution at that. The unity of the personal and the social was won by battle and conflict; it was achieved along with the progress of life itself. It came to Mayakovsky in the fullness and triumph of a first discovery. But it was preceded by an awareness that the personal is *antithetic* to the common.

The poem *Fine!* came only four years after *It*, but the imagery of the "October poem" is quite different; it expresses a different vision of the world. And if the "holes of houses", the "silence of apartments", the "houses-shells" are images pulsating with conflict, then, in the lines about the "little room-boat" in which the lyrical hero of *Fine!* "has sailed three thousand days with his eyes glued to the window the better to see out", the little world of the personal is no longer enclosed and static: it is being pulled along by the movement of the big outside world. This image anticipated Eluard's:

*Je peux vivre entre quatre murs  
Sans rien oublier du dehors.<sup>2</sup>*

*Fine!* reflects a new stage in the development of Mayakovsky's lyrical poetry which, having already mastered the social world, has recovered the right to a personal world once more. In Mayakovsky's mature works, intimate poetry was rediscovered as the wealth of feelings and emotions of the harmonious new man building the communist society.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Eluard, *Choix de poèmes*, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.



Mayakovsky's death, expanded and deepened, but did not change in essence:

*Tout dire les rochers, la route et les pavés  
Les rues et leurs passants, les champs et les bergers  
Le duvet du printemps, la rouille de l'hiver  
Le froid et la chaleur composant un seul fruit,<sup>1</sup>*

wrote Eluard, developing Mayakovsky's idea in his collection *To Be Able to Tell All* (*Pouvoir tout dire*) (1951). "The word 'frontier' is one-eyed. But people have two eyes—to see the whole world," he says, developing the same theme still further elsewhere in the cycle. "The five senses of the poet must get access to all horizons," wrote Neruda. Broniewski, Neumann, Hikmet, Becher, and Brecht also arrived at the idea of mastering life in all its fullness.

And so it was in Mayakovsky's poetry that progressive contemporary man was affirmed in all his manifold inner complexity and in all the richness of his ties with reality.

Mayakovsky's lyrical hero is not just the man of the 1920s: the poet foresees the prospects for the development of man in the future. As Becher said so aptly of Mayakovsky: "His works celebrate the birth of the new man, 'the man who has elevated himself in order to command Nature and to liberate himself and his fellows from cruel necessity' (Goethe).... The world-wide revolutionary significance of Mayakovsky, as we see it, is that he succeeded brilliantly in depicting himself in his works as a freely developing socialist personality."<sup>2</sup>

## 2

Mayakovsky also brilliantly epitomised the art of his time. His poetry was congenial to the heroic epoch of the Revolution and absorbed its colours and its features. Mayakovsky's poetic inspiration and aesthetics embodied the uniqueness of the Revolution's spiritual aspect—its efficacious, transformatory, totally demanding force.

In Mayakovsky's mature work the world is seen in all its wealth and multiformity. It gives a wide and complex picture of the personal element. Much space is devoted to love lyrics and the poetry of contradictory and complex inner experiences; the theme of Nature is elaborated. However, the personal element in Mayakovsky's poetry is firmly and deliberately kept within certain bounds.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Eluard, *Choix de poèmes*, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> *Pravda*, April 14, 1940.

In Mayakovsky's poetic world there is nothing personal which has no direct or indirect egress to the universally significant or vitally important, nothing personal which would evade the poet's self-control of partial moral and aesthetic evaluation, or which would not accord with the demands of life and the times. In Mayakovsky's poetry, as a rule, there is no withdrawn, isolated sphere of speculation and emotions. The poet's lyrically expressed feelings, however intense and gripping they may be in themselves, always seek a way out—into meaningful information, if not into the sphere of action.

Very symptomatic in this sense is the poetry of "eternal themes"; Mayakovsky's treatment of these was highly original.<sup>1</sup>

In its most general form, Mayakovsky's originality in the domain of "eternal themes" might be defined as a persistent striving to tame the flood of elemental feelings and to oppose them with the principle of reason. Instead of the kind of poetry, which "handles its theme" by "describing experiences" and which sees its meaning and goal in self-surrender to feeling and in finding the most appropriate means of expressing those feelings, he sought to create a lyrical poetry in which the truthful portrayal of emotions would be combined with the truth of the active human search for what was meaningful, good and rational in them, and should correspond—even if not directly, even if as the result of multistage associations—to the demands of life and the times.

In elaborating the theme of love, in particular, Mayakovsky used a maximalist yardstick in his approach to life's phenomena, and made exceptional demands on life. He did not allow himself to love any emotional state inspired by love; he did not want to become reconciled to the irrational, chaotic principle in love, and he battled with the "monster" of jealousy which, "overpowering the brains" is "scratching its way" into the human heart. He sought harmony in the complex world of feelings. His poetry does not acknowledge love as a source of capricious and changing moods which possess "beauty in themselves". He sought in love a force to elevate man, to ignite the creative fire in his breast, to inspire harmonious relationships between people.

Nature, the other "eternal theme", also acquired its own special ring with Mayakovsky. The image of nature absorbing and dissolving man was alien to Mayakovsky. His powerful urge to set himself up as an individual against Nature did not allow him to submit humbly to her power, to dissolve in contemplation of her beauty, to lose the self-control so dear to him. To the irrational power of Nature he counterposed the higher power of the human reason, which restrains and contains the fury of the elements.

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<sup>1</sup> See: "The Courage of Poetry", *Voprosy Literatry* No. 7, 1968, pp. 24-45.

But Mayakovsky's specific theme, that of man's triumph over Nature, has no abstract rationalist ring in his poetry. The elemental might even of a conquered Nature forcefully penetrated deep into Mayakovsky's poetry, permeating it with a living sense of wilful and powerful vital forces and with the complexity of human emotions and experience.

It is noteworthy that in Mayakovsky's description of love and Nature, "limitation" of the power of the elements appears as an artistic law common to both themes. Mayakovsky's poetry epitomises, as it were, the will of man as the conqueror and lord of the world, who possesses the magic ability to dominate the dark forces of "chaos". This is one of Mayakovsky's greatest claims to originality. It also makes itself felt in many other instances.

Such "eternal" human experiences as sadness, yearning, sorrow, bitter dissatisfaction with one's past life, etc., were, when embodied in Mayakovsky's poetry, "tamed" and limited by a certain "superfeeling" on the poet's part.

That Mayakovsky always found the artistic ways and means to limit, curb, and render harmless the emotions of yearning and sadness should not be seen as a feature of his poetry imposed and dictated from outside. It was a natural characteristic of his nature, which was strong, resistant, ready for battle. But what matters most is that organically expressed in this peculiarity of his were the first years of the Revolution. The character of Mayakovsky's poetry was attuned to the character of the times, which were notable for heroic aspirations to universal happiness and which were permeated with determined self-denial for society's sake and for that of the Revolution. His poetry shows a profound awareness that the epoch called for complete and total dedication, and to some extent, allowed no carelessness in self-expression.

It has already been mentioned that, in his mature work, Mayakovsky rehabilitated the personal lyrical poetry, the poetry of intimate feelings, experiences and emotions. This lyrical poetry, however, having regained its rights over the human soul, returned to Mayakovsky's work in a new quality. "Overthrown" by the social principle, it underwent a sort of trial by social significance and human values after which it could not remain "narrow" or cut off from the world at large; it now showed a certain relationship with the historical process, striving to be worthy of the lofty ideals of the Revolution. As an intimate lyrical poet Mayakovsky was strict with himself; before allowing himself freedom of "self-expression", he was able to rise above his own feelings and evaluate their probable social and moral repercussions.

Mayakovsky himself regarded the severe restriction of feelings and emotions, and also of self-expression, as limitations which he *had* to



observe himself if he was to measure up to the demands of the time. He had shouldered an enormous burden of responsibility for all, and so he could not freely surrender himself to the unbridled forces of inner feelings and emotions:

*I must stand here*  
*I'll weep for all*  
*and I do stand—for all,*  
*and for all I'll pay....*

This was a daily feat. It gave him a troubled happiness—the happiness of a great man and a great artist; but it also meant agonies of deliberate self-restriction:

*A bullet for all.*  
*for all a knife....*  
*But when, myself*  
*will I ever taste life?*  
 .....  
*But that which others get?*  
*I'd like it, too!*  
*There's none of it for me—*  
*only for you!*

Mayakovsky foresaw that, in the beautiful future, the unconstrained and free manifestation of human nature would become a norm, and the free man of the future would be able to "love anything he likes". It was natural for Mayakovsky to be carried away into an unclouded "lyrical heaven" when he was dreaming about the future in *It*. But, standing with his feet on the ground and surveying the planet, which was still so "ill equipped for gaiety", he did not want to surrender himself to passive contemplation; he felt obliged to act, work, restructure life, reform and discipline human minds.

In one of his love poems he speaks of poetry's mission: to "raise, and lead, and draw in those whose eyes have become weak, to slice off enemy heads from their shoulders with a shining tailed sabre". True, Mayakovsky also mentions yet another function of poetry: "that two lovers might look at the stars from their lilac arbour." This is, of course, a concession to pure lyrical poetry; but in allowing it, he is being ironical about himself. In the future, however, it will be another matter. The world will then be open to contemplation as well, to the enjoyment of its beauty in harmony with the "unregulated" wealth of human feelings. But meanwhile "*even the star must not escape*" the

scrutinising appraisal of the poet and must not carry him aloft into a world of abstract admiration of beauty.

It would, of course, be quite wrong to regard Mayakovsky as a dry, soberly rational poet. The mighty elemental forces of life—human experiences and emotions in all their manifold forms—are the very core of his poetry. But elemental manifestations of life do not remain in it “on their own”; they come into contact with the reason. What is original about Mayakovsky’s aesthetics is the collision and interaction of two diametrically opposite principles—“elemental force” and “reason”—in which reason, without giving free rein to the chaos of feelings and emotions, seems to fuse with that chaos to create a new and tense unity.

Mayakovsky’s heroic poetry is akin to many trends in Soviet literature during the 1920s and 1930s. In specifically refracted form, it reflects the clashes of opposites which were portrayed, by different means, in the novels and stories of Sholokhov, Serafimovich, Fadeyev, Fedin, Nikolai Ostrovsky, and others.

Contemporary poetry has covered several decades since Mayakovsky’s time. Naturally, it has not stood still during this period and has acquired new features. In the lyrical verse of our days, compared with that of the 1920s, there has been an undoubted growth of freedom in poetic feeling: the freedom to enjoy beauty in a considerably wider sense than before; moreover, the fear of abstract contemplation has vanished.

If Mayakovsky’s poetry was nourished by action, by an active involvement in facts and events, and if for him the objective world was, above all, an object of human activity, the new poetry is notable for a greater leaning towards the complexity and individual character of human emotions and experience which have acquired a significance of their own outside the sphere of behaviour and actions. Poets have been turning more and more to the “ordinary” joys and the “simple” values of life, and more importance is being attached to the significance of universal human motives.

As we have seen, the possibility and the inevitability of an expansion of the poetic sphere was not only predicted by Mayakovsky, but was rooted in his own poems; it was noticeable in the main line of his development which proceeded in the same direction but was arrested at an earlier stage of that movement.

As a classical expression of revolutionary poetry in the 1920s, Mayakovsky’s poetry is still topical today. Moreover, his work is topical not only in its revolutionary content (which is obvious), but also in the aesthetic principles which were expounded in his poetry.

Johannes Becher, elaborating upon a thought of Pascal's, affirms that "the man, who fails to rise above himself and to surpass himself, is of necessity obliged to withdraw into himself, to lag behind himself, and so only the man who incessantly demands more of himself and thus rises above and surpasses himself—only such a man can fulfil the measure of human possibilities accessible to him".<sup>1</sup> These words are akin to Mayakovsky's aesthetics.

It is no accident, of course, that the heroic theme of "self-surpassing", of "transcending boundaries", ever present deep in Mayakovsky's poetry, is close to 20th-century world progressive poetry. Thus, for instance, Becher, in his *A Word to Posterity*, also stresses the theme of mastery as the most important element of his poetry:

*Gemeldet sei von mir: "Er litt und rang  
Um Deutschland, das er liebte, doch nicht minder  
Rang er mit sich, wobei ihm viel-mißlang.  
Er trug viel Lasten, und als schwerste Last  
Trug er sich selbst, daran zerbrach er fast.  
Er war ein Übergang. Ein Überwinder."*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Becher, *Poetry, My Love. On Literature and Art*, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1965, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes R. Becher, *Ausgewählte Dichtung aus der Zeit der Verbannung*, Berlin, 1946.

Alexander  
Ushakov

## Two Destinies: Mayakovsky and George Grosz — Their Attitude to the Revolution

There is a series of drawings by the remarkable German artist George Grosz on pp. 190-95. With great power, he exposes the world of private property relations, highlighting its obvious and hidden vices alike. We see a whole gallery of satirical types — overfed, bull-necked factory owners, stupid, pompous generals, supercilious dignitaries. When we study these portraits with their scathing derision and bitter sarcasm, we are reminded of Mayakovsky's wrathful attack on war profiteers:

*You, wallowing through orgy after orgy,  
Owners of a bathroom and warm, snug toilet!  
How dare you read about awards of St. Georgi  
From newspaper columns with your blinkers oily?*

*Aren't you aware, multitudinous nonentities,  
Thinking how better to fill your gob,  
That just now, perhaps, Petrov the lieutenant  
Had both his legs torn off by a bomb?*

Grosz is haunted by legless cripples asking for alms, the war-disabled who now find themselves out in the cold. At the sight of these drawings, so full of compassion for human suffering, we inevitably remember Mayakovsky's own war scenes. In his pre-revolutionary writing, war is shown as a gigantic carnage in which millions perish to no purpose:

*Nobody had asked  
that the laurels of winner  
be ordained to the land in war.  
To the limbless leavings of a bloody dinner  
what the hell are they for?  
Last corpses pitched in a heap.  
To Kovno we beat retreat.  
Yards deep  
lies minced human meat.*

.....  
*For the fifth day running, bend after bend,  
through shot head feel train crawl....  
In a rotting waggon  
forty men  
with four  
legs  
for all.*

One of Grosz's favourite themes is the modern capitalist city which overwhelms man with the might of hostile technology, its frantic pace of life, its excess of sensations, its furtive criminality and its desperate sensationalism. That is how we see it, for instance, in the series *Germany—a Winter's Tale* (1917-1919) and *Culprit Unknown* (1919), which inevitably bring to mind some of Mayakovsky's pre-revolutionary verses (*A Hell of a City; Noises Medium, Tiny, Huge*). And so we see that there is a considerable resemblance between the work of the outstanding German artist and that of the great Russian revolutionary poet.

There is nothing new about this. It has occurred to many research scholars without, it is true, being substantiated in theoretical terms or being studied in greater depth. O. Litovsky, in his book *So It Was*, observed some time ago that many of Mayakovsky's poems read like a "written commentary of Grosz's drawings". But there is also a kind of "feedback" here: many of Grosz's works seem inspired by Mayakovsky, and some of them might almost be taken as illustrations to his verse. This was pointed out by V. Alfonsov, author of an interesting book, *Words and Colours*. His claim is justified to the extent that in Grosz's satirical drawings there is "much in common with the art of Mayakovsky".

But won't it be stretching things to draw parallels between the creative work of the poet and the artist? After all, apart from their resemblance, there are serious differences. The more closely we study Grosz's drawings and the more deeply we go into Mayakovsky's verse, the more we realise that each is unique as an artist. Furthermore, their careers followed different courses.

If Mayakovsky's satire is based on the affirmation of revolutionary reality, Grosz totally is absorbed in the purely negative task of exposing bourgeois society. To him, evil is all-embracing, and the world is seen as a trap. He cannot find any support for his criticism in the world around him, and denunciation invariably predominates in his works, inspired, as they are, by a hatred for all the products of the bourgeois system.

The socialist revolution was interpreted by Mayakovsky as a mighty cleansing and creative force. All his post-October work is imbued with his message of world reformation. Even his satire is an affirmation of revolutionary reality. His state of mind, his sense of the times, and his feeling of identification with the revolutionary epoch are summed up in the well-known passage from the poem *Fine!*—"Life is marvellous, life is beautiful!"

Grosz welcomed the proletarian Revolution in Russia and the November 1918 Revolution in Germany. In the twenties, he went through a period of the most intense creative inspiration, achieving true

heights of social criticism; but then, owing to the defeat of the revolution in the West and the stabilisation of capitalism, he became disillusioned and lost his real historic bearings.

And yet in spite of these differences, which were differences of genre and world-outlook, there is every justification for comparing these two leading representatives of 20th-century art. That one was primarily a poet and the other a graphic artist need not deter us in the least.

As is demonstrated by past experience in art, typological features often become evident in the development of creative art in its various aspects. All the more so since the practitioners of the various arts—writers, painters, sculptors and others—frequently prove to be akin to one another in their moods, predilections, and so forth. To put it in another way, the affinity is discovered in the very nature of their creative thinking. Finally, it should be remembered that various aspects of art interact, enriching one another with ways and means of creative expression.

As for the “mutual relations” between poetry and painting, artistic practice has shown that it is not usually difficult to find instances of a special “interpenetration” in their development: the poets often draw inspiration from the graphic arts, borrowing images, subject matter, and so on, while, on the other hand, literary sources often play an important part in the work of the artist.

Mayakovsky, of course, had a remarkable talent for drawing. His work on the ROSTA posters is a brilliant page in the development of Soviet satirical graphic art. But however paradoxical it may seem, there are far more grounds for comparison with Grosz in Mayakovsky's verse than in his satirical drawings.

It should be stressed that the connection between Mayakovsky's verse and painting does not fit into the framework of the traditional recourse of writers to the graphic arts solely as a special source of inspiration. It goes much deeper. Mayakovsky's poetical imagery is inherently graphic. The visual and the pictorial are qualities of the poet's actual creative thinking; they are integral to his style.

On the other hand, Grosz's work is also oriented, as it were, on literary sources. With him, the caption for a cartoon is an integral part of the satirical portrait, supplementing the graphic image and intensifying the denunciatory significance of the picture. Willi Wolfradt, one of the first to do serious research on Grosz, was perfectly right when he commented that “a liberal admixture of the literary, in the best sense of the word, is to be found in the graphic art of George Grosz”<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Willi Wolfradt, *George Grosz*, Leipzig, 1921, S. 10-11. See also the introductory article by Lothar Lang in the book *George Grosz*, Berlin, 1966, S. 8.

As it is not possible within the scope of this article to deal fully with the mutual creative relations of Mayakovsky and Grosz, it would seem best, bearing in mind the individual evolution of each, to compare primarily those of their works which were dedicated to the overthrow of the capitalist world order, and to compare the poet's satirical verse with the artist's work during the twenties, when his drawings were most significant in the ideological-artistic sense and were most scathing and profound in their criticism of bourgeois society.

Mayakovsky and Grosz belonged to the same generation, and the same social, political and artistic events in many respects left traces on their lives and work. There are many points of resemblance even in their life stories: both were born in 1893 and in the same month — Mayakovsky on the 19th of July and Grosz on the 26th. They made their creative débutes roughly at the same time. Both were much influenced by modernist trends: Mayakovsky by Russian Futurism, Grosz by German Expressionism. For Mayakovsky and Grosz alike, the October Revolution and the events it inspired were a critical breakthrough in their creative development. In the autumn of 1922, Mayakovsky left on a foreign trip and spent nearly two months altogether in Berlin. In the summer of that year, Grosz visited the Soviet Union, where he stayed for several months. Some of their trips to France also coincided: 1924-1925 and 1927.

At one stage, the lives of Mayakovsky and Grosz drew so close that one wonders if they were personally acquainted. This may now be considered an established fact, although no written evidence of their association has come to light. According to Grosz's closest friend, Wieland Herzfelde, who was also the publisher of nearly all his albums, Mayakovsky and Grosz met on more than one occasion.

On December 20, 1922, soon after returning from Germany, Mayakovsky delivered an address "What Is Berlin Doing?", in which he referred to Grosz as a "remarkable phenomenon" who had "absorbed all the social prerequisites of Germany". In his sketch "Berlin Today", written early in 1923, he speaks of Grosz as a "marvellous ... artist".

The poet brought back albums of Grosz's drawings. This is mentioned by O. Litovsky in his book: "The little room in the Lubyanka Passage was full of Mayakovsky. He kept pacing up and down, and I had to sit on the divan so as not to get in his way.

"There was an open suitcase beside me on the divan. Mayakovsky had only just returned from Berlin after a long trip abroad....

"I was just about to go, when Mayakovsky stopped me and triumphantly took from the bottom of the suitcase one of three albums by the German Communist artist George Grosz. It was called *Ecce homo* (*Behold the Man*). Handing me the album, Mayakovsky told me

its story. The album could only be obtained with great difficulty in Berlin itself, since it had been confiscated for immorality by order of the Berlin court and the artist had been fined five hundred marks.

"The whole album consisted of satirical drawings of unusual savagery. Each drawing could be read as the chapter of a satirical story or as a stanza from a denunciatory poem."

Several of Grosz's drawings, taken, in all probability, from the albums brought by Mayakovsky, were published in the January issues of the weekly journal *Krasnaya Niva* in 1923, with a note by O. Brik, "The Communist Artist George Grosz", and also in the second issue of *LEF* in that year, with an article by Grosz entitled "About My Work".

Mayakovsky, in his turn, was not an unknown quantity to Grosz. In his book *A Small Yes and a Big No*, recalling his meeting at the Soviet embassy in Berlin with S. Tretyakov, writer, journalist, and one of the most active members of the LEF movement, Grosz writes: "Earlier, he had belonged to Mayakovsky's circle and had been close to Futurism. Now he wanted to compose in the style of the instructions you receive with goods that you buy in the shops."<sup>1</sup> This tells us that Grosz was familiar with certain phenomena in Russian twentieth-century poetry and had definite ideas about the development of so-called Left-wing art in the post-revolutionary years, about Mayakovsky's position in the literary struggle, about relations within the LEF group, and about its aesthetic programme. Grosz evidently also knew about LEF's theory of "production" art, of which S. Tretyakov was a proponent and active propagandist.

Mayakovsky's interest in the remarkable German satirist was neither casual nor short-lived.

His acquaintance with Grosz's works coincided with the time when he conceived the idea of creating an international front of "Left" art. His leading article for the second issue of *LEF*, which published caricatures and a commentary by Grosz, contained the following summons: "Left ones of the World! We don't know your names too well or the names of your schools; but we know well that you are growing wherever the Revolution grows. We summon you to form a united front of Left art—'Krasny Iskintern' ('Réd Art International'). Comrades! Wherever you are, split off Left art from Right! Use Left art: in Europe, to prepare the Revolution and in the USSR; to consolidate it." The possibility cannot be excluded that the idea of welding Left artistic forces together on a basis of struggle for a new and

<sup>1</sup> George Grosz, *Ein Kleines Ja und ein grosses Nein*, Hamburg, 1955, S. 149.



revolutionary art came to Mayakovsky directly as a result of his trip abroad in 1922, during which he was able to familiarise himself closely with the artistic life of Germany and France and with the works of certain progressive Western artists.

Introducing Grosz to the Russian reader and encouraging the publication of his drawings in the Soviet press, Mayakovsky saw him as a potential ally in the struggle for the new and revolutionary art.

Early in January 1923, a letter was handed into the Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party with a request to authorise the publication of the journal *LEF*. The first issue came out in March. When the publishing plans for *LEF* were being drawn up, a number of Soviet and foreign writers, critics, scholars and artists were suggested as possible contributors to the journal. In this list, George Grosz's name occurred alongside those of Tristan Tsara, Delaunay and others.

Although the idea of forming a "Red Art International" remained unfulfilled, Mayakovsky did not give it up. In a series of speeches, he referred to the necessity for establishing durable ties with the artistic vanguard of foreign countries. Touching on this theme in a debate on December 13, 1928, about the artistic exhibition for the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution, he again mentioned Grosz: "...European Left painting is providing artists needed for communist culture, for communist art. Diego Rivera, for instance.... Take the Communist George Grosz, who has come from the most Left-wing trends of painting in the West."

It is interesting to note that not long before Mayakovsky's death, the deputy editor of *Za Rubezhom* (*Abroad*), Taras Kostrov, with whom the poet was on friendly terms, in a letter to Gorky, the founder and director of the journal, mentioned the desirability of Grosz's participation. "We must get in touch," he wrote, "with the foreign artists closest to us in spirit and attract them to active cooperation on the journal (Grosz, for instance)."

And so we see that Mayakovsky did not lose interest in Grosz as the years went by. This was only natural: the artist's cartoons were appearing more and more frequently in Soviet magazines and journals, and were dealing with processes, which we had in common, of socio-political and literary life. Grosz became a subject for research; critical studies were written about him and controversies arose over his work. A special article, "Art in Jeopardy", was devoted to him by Lunacharsky, who met with him during his stay in Germany at the end of 1925 and the beginning of 1926. "George Grosz is one of the most important talents in contemporary graphic art. A brilliantly original draughtsman and an angry and penetrating caricaturist of bourgeois

society.... I had the rare pleasure of seeing in Berlin almost everything that George Grosz has produced so far.

"Truly amazing in the power of his talent and in the power of his rage"—is how Lunacharsky summed up the work of this outstanding master<sup>1</sup>.

The immediate reason for this article was the publication in 1926 in Russian of a small book by George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde entitled *Art in Jeopardy*, the preface to which evoked a negative reaction from Lunacharsky. Mayakovsky must have known about this booklet and the controversy it stirred up: the editor of the book, and also the author of the preface, was the critic V. Pertsov, who was associated with the LEF group.

In *Art in Jeopardy*, Grosz gives a fairly comprehensive outline of his views on art, and on its place in the class struggle and in social life. He analyses the state of contemporary art, gives an interesting account of various trends and schools, shows their evolution under the impact of social reality and of the technological progress which has brought in its train the revaluation of many hitherto seemingly unshakeable philosophical and aesthetic conceptions. Grosz attempts to interpret his creative path in the light of the prospects for the development of a contemporary art.

Grosz's earliest work, as he admits himself, bore the stamp of individualistic scepticism and misanthropy. "...In the period before the war," he writes, "my world outlook might have been summed up as follows: people are swine. Discussions of ethics are a fraud invented for fools. There is no meaning in life other than the satisfaction of hunger and lust. The soul does not exist.... My work showed a violent revulsion from life which was surpassed only by an enormous interest in everything that was happening. If the revulsion had been greater than this interest, I would have choked to death."<sup>2</sup>

The early Mayakovsky proceeded from a different standpoint. His feelings of isolation and despair, which were his own personal reaction to the social horrors of the life around him, did not deprive him of faith in the existence of humanity in the world. In some works, true, this reaction sounds like a cry for help: sometimes it becomes a willingness on his part to sacrifice himself for the people's sake; sometimes it takes the form of prophetic vision; but it gradually yields to a conviction that the time is approaching when

<sup>1</sup> A. V. Lunacharsky, *Collected Works* in eight volumes, Russ. Ed., Moscow, 1964, Vol. IV, p. 418.

<sup>2</sup> George Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde, *Die Kunst ist in Gefahr*, Malik Verlag, S. 19.

*He, the free man  
of whom I holler  
he'll come,  
believe me,  
yes, he will!*

Mayakovsky's writings during this period were permeated with a humanist message; they were illumined by a dream of the advent of a new and free life, a dream which, despite its admittedly utopian colouring, was clearly revolutionary.

Mayakovsky's protest against the imperialist war grew into a premonition of the approaching Revolution: "Crowned with the thorns of revolt the year 1916 draws nigh."

In Grosz's philosophy of life, war did not bring substantial changes. "The hopes of certain of my friends for peace and revolution," writes Grosz, "I regarded as unfounded."<sup>1</sup> True, his eyes had been opened to a great deal. He had, for the first time, seen people of a revolutionary frame of mind, had begun to look at them more closely, and evil no longer seemed an indestructible monolith. But Grosz was not quite able to shed the blinkers of scepticism. And it is very important to stress one more point here. If Mayakovsky's criticism at this period was directed against the very foundations of the bourgeois system, Grosz, on his own admission, did not realise that a "whole system" was at the root of the absurdities with which life was becoming so full.

The Revolution, in Grosz's opinion, had faced art with the great social task of helping to "rid the world of supernatural forces, god and the angels, and to show man his true position in the environment"<sup>2</sup>. Art, he says, is faced with a dilemma: either to aim for subordination to the purposes of production, of development in the constructivist spirit, or to become associated with the struggle of the proletariat. Any other course, from his point of view, drives art into the reactionary camp or leads to its dilution in the cinema and in photography. In defining the dilemma facing art—to serve production and daily life, or to serve the Revolution—Grosz does not avoid making his own choice. For him, these two roads are not equivalent, as V. Pertsov tried to show in his introduction to *Art in Jeopardy*. Lunacharsky was right to criticise Pertsov's viewpoint in this respect rightly stressing that Grosz in his book defends the power of an art whose future certainly does not lie with the constructivist course. And this was indeed so. Throughout the whole of his book, Grosz affirms the idea that art must serve the

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<sup>1</sup> Geogre Grosz and Wieland Herzfelde. *Die Kunst ist in Gefahr*, Marik Verlag, S. 22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, S. 43.

Revolution, and the artist's obligation "as preacher, defender and follower of the ideas of the revolution ... is to join the ranks of the oppressed who are struggling for the rational social organisation of life"<sup>1</sup>.

In maintaining that art should be judged by its social usefulness and effectiveness, Grosz nevertheless does not restrict its function to agitation alone. He speaks of the necessity to "find the *artistic* expression of the workers' revolutionary struggle..."<sup>2</sup> (Italics mine—A. U.).

Grosz considers that the artist's language should be comprehensible to the majority: this is dictated by the social and ideological objectives of contemporary art. "...A vague and entirely individual manifestation of inner, mystically alarming experience" is, for him, unacceptable now. In his article "About My Work", published in *LEF*, he writes: "...I am again trying to give an absolutely realistic portrayal of the world. I strive to be understandable to everybody, without the currently unavoidable "profundities" into which one should never descend except in a diving suit stuffed with cabbalistic mumbo-jumbo and metaphysics."

In his articles and speeches during the twenties, Mayakovsky expresses views in many respects very near to those of Grosz on the objectives of art: on the link between creative art and the revolutionary struggle of the working people, on the role of the revolutionary writer in society, and on the accessibility and comprehensibility of his work.

In comparing Mayakovsky's creative activity with that of Grosz, we find something common (for all their differences of standpoint) to more than their aesthetic judgements alone.

Grosz directs his main attack against those in charge of Germany's destiny after the war: the bourgeoisie, the military caste, the church. His drawings show up these forces in all their nauseating ugliness. A bourgeoisie, hardened and befouled by corruption, squeezing the workers dry; a Prussian military caste defying the law and trying to turn the country into an army barracks; a church justifying violence and blessing evil; and, on the other hand, a people crippled by war, starving, mercilessly exploited, helpless to change anything. It is impossible not to see resemblances between this "face of the ruling class" (the title of one of Grosz's most damaging series of drawings) and the picture of the bourgeois world which comes to life in Mayakovsky's poetry; and not only in the general denunciatory passion of their works, but in their very approach to the interpretation of these

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., S. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., S. 31.

Right Belongs to  
the Strong. Drawing  
by G. Grosz.



phenomena. The poetic thought of Mayakovsky and Grosz moves, in many respects, in the same direction when they try to show these malignant forces form into a definite system, profoundly inhuman and harbouring the source of endless misery.

Mayakovsky's satirical analysis of the bourgeois world, however, which goes much deeper than that of Grosz's, was made in the light of vast social and historical prospects. It is certainly no accident that the people are depicted in Grosz's drawings for the most part as a suffering element. It is interesting that the description of Germany between 1922 and 1923 in Mayakovsky's verses and sketches coincide even in detail (signs of economic ruin, poverty, inflation, the vast numbers of starving and cripples, and so on) with what is shown in Grosz's works, but with one exception: the poet sees the other side of the coin—revolutionary speeches and strikes. And this is what prompted, in the poem *Germany*, the lines so full of compassion for the German working class:

Long Live Noske!  
The Young Revolution Is Smashed!  
Drawing by  
G. Grosz.



Be patient, Comrades, in vengeance's name.  
For everything —

the war,  
and after,  
and before,  
with all who were here  
and with all who came  
we'll settle accounts in a Red revanche war!

Grosz is completely lacking in this awareness of possible "October upheavals" and "preludes to our nineteen seventeen".

Grosz is categorical and merciless in his judgements, whose extreme starkness brings to mind Mayakovsky's own: "As regards direct indications, who is the culprit and who is not — my own ... inclination is that I don't like uncertainty here. I like to say outright who are the

The Toads. Drawing by G. Grosz.

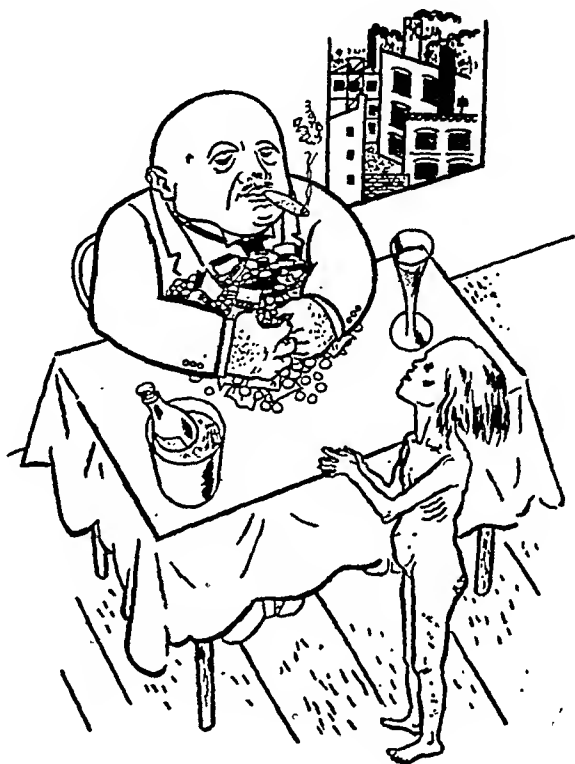


scum." Grosz is perhaps even more harsh in his criticism, but this is in many respects the harshness of a man desperately on the defensive, lacking allies in his struggle, and unable to find a fulcrum in life. If Mayakovsky's satirical attacks are very accurately calculated and have a specific social and political objective, if his criticism aims at getting rid of the obstacles to the strengthening of humanist principles in the world, the inspiration and target of Grosz's satire is not just the denunciation of what is monstrous in the realities of bourgeois life. In Grosz's criticism, alongside the uncompromising condemnation of the German military machine, philistinism, ecclesiastical hypocrisy, and so on, we are made aware of the artist's doubts whether "man is good" by nature, whether the world can be delivered from evil, and whether it can be rebuilt on the foundations of justice. *Ecce homo* is the title of one series of drawings by Grosz. Portraying the various representative human types of the bourgeois world in all their sickening ugliness, the artist also compels one to think about human nature in general.

Sink or Swim.

Drawing

by G. Grosz.



Mayakovsky and Grosz both use largely identical principles of generalisation from the raw material of life. As a rule, they endeavour, through the satirical portrayal of an individual person or specific situation, to show the essence of the hostile class, political party, or social group as a whole.

Both of them have a leaning for the image built up on the trait which determines the physiognomy of the whole social force. No matter who is portrayed in Grosz's drawings and Mayakovsky's writings—bourgeois, ecclesiastic philistine, or militarist, and in whatever situations he may figure—it is never just an individual endowed with certain specific traits, but is the personification of a certain social entity. Although the portraits by Grosz and Mayakovsky are saturated with detail, it is the typical features that are highlighted. Consequently, the individualisation of the image, even given fairly extensive detail in the drawing, is minimal: the attention of the spectator and the reader must not be distracted from what is fundamental and inherent. The result may be a poster image, but it is not a poster. Lunacharsky's comment



Friedrichstrasse.  
Drawing by  
G. Grosz.



on Grosz—"a master of social analysis and synthesis in highly economic visual images"<sup>1</sup>—may also be fully applied to the satirical art of Mayakovsky. Lunacharsky referred to this method of generalisation as "social typification".

Most of Grosz's drawings are based on stark contrasts. There is always some kind of antithesis: luxury and poverty; a military parade and crippled war veterans; hard labour and corruption; drunkenness and gluttony. On one drawing we see an elegantly dressed gentleman loaded with shopping and walking with bestial indifference past a legless cripple (*Mind Your Feet!*); on another, an emaciated girl timidly puts out her skinny hands and begs from a corpulent factory owner

<sup>1</sup> A. V. Lunacharsky, *Collected Works*, Vol. IV, p. 424.

How the Supreme  
Court Should  
Look. Drawing by  
G. Grosz.



sitting at table, his fat paws clutching a pile of money (*Sink or Swim* from the *Räuber* series); on a third — a symbol of violence and cruelty towering over the shackled workers — the figure of a soldier, whip in hand: *Germany Has the Freest Constitution in the World!*

This method is at the basis of many of Mayakovsky's works, and it is enough to recall his poems from the American cycle. For example, *Black and White*:

*In Havana*

*everything's*

*clearly defined:*

*whites have dollars,*

*blacks — none.*

Drawings by A.  
Kanevsky for the  
poem *Conference-  
Crazy*.



On the one hand, "paradise of a country", a country of abundance, wealth, amusement; on the other hand, poverty, dirt, manual labour. On the one hand, "the most majestic of the sugar kings", Mister Bragg; on the other, Willy, the black shoeshine boy who has spent his whole life "cleaning off a forest of dust specks".

It should be noted that in depicting social contrasts—violence and oppression, wealth and poverty, aggressiveness and the love of peace, and so on—Mayakovsky always takes strictly historical line. Any contrast he draws ultimately leads to the struggle between two worlds. This theme is central to many of Mayakovsky's works, growing into an affirmation of the historical justness of the socialist cause.

In the imagery of Mayakovsky and Grosz, hyperbole, often carried to grotesque extremes, is very typical. However unusually the image is built up, the development of the artistic thought is always motivated. Take, for instance, Grosz's drawing *Prost Noske! Die junge Revolution ist tot!* (*Long Live Noske! The Young Revolution Is Smashed!*), which denounced the counter-revolution: a triumphant officer salutes Noske,

one of those who strangled the November 1918 Revolution in Germany. But Grosz would not have been Grosz if he had merely shown the street piled with the bodies of the slain. He was a master of the sharp, grotesque detail: the officer stands, his chest pompously stuck out, as if he is on parade: in one hand he holds a bottle of champagne, in the other a bloody sabre on the point of which an infant is writhing in its death agony. And the extent of the exposure becomes painfully clear. This is not just a victor, but a murderer with a long string of atrocities behind him.

Just as ineradicably memorable is the bold hyperbolic detail which Mayakovsky puts into his work for the purposes of denunciation. In the poem *Stinnes*, he uses the following images: "...instead of a mouth, Stinnes has the Reichstag. His legs are the German railways", "his pocket is the German State Bank", his voice is "every column in thousands of German newspapers". And we see not simply the all-powerful German industrialist, but something much bigger. Stinnes is shown in the poem as private ownership personified, a terrible force which, like a cancer, has spread into all the cells of life and from which it is impossible to hide or escape.

One of the methods extensively used by Grosz is to underline the "unaesthetic" in a phenomenon by highlighting crude details. He puts on exhibition all the hidden vices of bourgeois society, showing prostitution, ghastly murders, sadistic perversions, and so on. His world is regularly frequented by naked, pathetic, and yet horrifyingly ugly women, lecherous burghers, habitués of night cafés and vice dens. There is nothing on their faces but lust and sensuality: the figures writhe with bestial desires. Reality is seen as a world of ugliness, vice, and venality. In other words, naturalism with Grosz serves to condemn the disgraceful realities. We find much the same kind of thing in Mayakovsky's early works, although he is more restrained in his portrayal of these aspects of life. Grosz's eroticism, intensified by complex hyperbole, sometimes goes beyond the limits of satirical exposure. Concerning this side of Grosz's art, it should be borne in mind that his work to some extent continues a tradition of German coarse satire that dates back to the seventeenth century.

In analysing the artistic methods used by Mayakovsky and Grosz, we cannot, of course, limit ourselves to the resemblances between them. There are substantial differences in their principles of typification. But this is inevitable, since the creative style of each is inimitable and unique.

The comparison of the views and work of Mayakovsky and Grosz testifies, of course, not to a reciprocal influence, but to kindred features—allowing for all the ideological and aesthetic differences—in the creative thinking of the two men.

In the publisher's plan for the journal *LEF*, submitted in 1923 to the Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, mention is made of the necessity for struggle "for the affirmation of tendentious realism".

By "tendentious realism", Mayakovsky meant the art of openly expressed social involvement, of the harsh exposure of tendencies lodged in the artistic image, and the bold handling of the material. This art examines reality through a powerful magnifying glass. It strips off the external envelope of phenomena and turns them inside out, laying bare everything hidden under the externals of everyday life. This type of art was engendered by the demands of reality itself. The epoch of crying social contrasts, tremendous political and spiritual upheavals, massive revolutionary shifts and so on, brought to life, among other realistic forms, the art of forceful and impassioned analysis, of special intensity in the creative image. The work of Mayakovsky and Grosz belongs to this very approach to the interpretation of reality in artistic form.

The creative development of these two outstanding representatives of 20th-century art, who drew close together at a certain moment in history, subsequently moved in different directions—under the impact of specific, in each case, conditions of social reality and by virtue of the differing ideological and aesthetic aspirations of the two men. Grosz became less socially involved. The denunciatory passion of his satire during and after the thirties weakened considerably. Summing up his life's work, he could only say to the world *A Little Yes and a Big No*: this is the significant title of his reminiscences, published shortly before his death. But in spite of this, Grosz in his best works rightly holds one of the leading places in the revolutionary satire of the 20th century. As for Mayakovsky, his work acquired with the years a mounting sense of historical optimism, and he was able to express with tremendous artistic power the essence of the new and revolutionary epoch and the world outlook of the socialist individual.

## Mayakovsky's Heritage in the Modern World

The greatness of Mayakovsky's creative achievement was acknowledged by many of his contemporaries. "A well-spring of inexhaustible vitality," said Lunacharsky of him soon after his death<sup>1</sup>. Another contemporary, Boris Lavrenev, saw Mayakovsky as the "vital and full-blooded heart of the epoch". He also noted a very important characteristic of the poet's work: "Mayakovsky rose to his full stature in the future; with open eyes he saw the future forms of life and shouted about them."

The secret behind the immortality of great works of art has always troubled the artists themselves. Attempts to divine it are made in our own times too, and not always successfully. Mayakovsky was often reproached in his lifetime for frittering away his talent and concentrating so much on "current affairs": after all, only a concern with the eternal, they held, was worthy of the true poet. Some of his friends even felt that "topicality was brandishing the big stick" and turning the free artist into a prisoner of his time. Even to this day, some progressive poets (especially abroad) are misled by theories according to which the poet is considered above his times or a "prisoner of the age". Mayakovsky heatedly attacked such theories. No prophecies of the oblivion threatened by a "disrespectful" attitude to "eternity" could shake his conviction that, in the epoch of a great revolution, the eternal was not contradicted by the topical, if the latter is seen not as the froth on the tide of events, but as a manifestation of fundamental historical processes and of the poetic awareness that they aroused.

The overwhelming majority of contemporary readers belong to the post-Mayakovsky generation. But for the middle-aged, and for younger readers too, Mayakovsky's poetry epitomises the fusion of art and contemporaneity.

What has made it possible for Mayakovsky's verse, so topical in the twenties, to preserve and even increase its impact on the minds and hearts of the seventies? Does it mean that the historical principle, so highly valued by the art of socialist realism, loses its significance when applied to great artists? On the contrary, Mayakovsky's example in particular convinces us that only artistic thought which plumbs the laws behind the movement of contemporary history, however unpredictable some of its zig-zags may seem, is capable of catching and recording what is eternal in the ephemeral and the transitory.

However, in a moment of depression (and even the bravest are subject to them), Mayakovsky likened his fate to the slanting rain which by-passes the home country. He did not include the stanza about

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<sup>1</sup> A. V. Lunacharsky, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, p. 478.

The monument to the poet in Mayakovsky Square.



the slanting rain in the published text of the poem, foreseeing that his enemies would take advantage of it, and he even poked fun at his own "beautiful" image. At the present time, renewed efforts are being made to place every conceivable interpretation on this indication of bitterness, while ignoring everything that the poet did after October, although it contradicts the image of the slanting rain. What he achieved is far more accurately and comprehensively expressed by the credo: "The poet must be at the heart of affairs and events." This voices the profound conviction that the era of socialism secretes new, unprecedented and inexhaustible sources of poetry. The poet's mission is to discover them and reveal them to mankind.

The treatment of contemporaneity as a link in the historical process is one of the most important principles of socialist realism. In affirming

this, Mayakovsky has performed a particularly valuable service. It was here that he showed his profound originality and genuine gift for innovation.

Rejecting "realism with its eyes on the ground", which limited the portrayal of life to the sphere of persistent but, in fact, obsolete forms of existence, Mayakovsky called himself a realist who drew his inspiration from the "new, future life". But he could only do so because he was "at the centre of affairs and events" at the time. And this was determined both by the nature of his talents and the spirit of the October era, which chose him as its spokesman. That is why the above-mentioned, somewhat strange and even, at first glance, almost contradictory, definition of Mayakovsky as a poet who stood in the future and was at the heart of his epoch, in point of fact conveys very accurately the dialectics of the interaction between the great poet and the great epoch. Never in the history of mankind has there been an age which, like that begun by October, has so fervently and determinedly transformed the ideals of the future in each creative or even everyday act of daring.

This epoch produced a remarkable galaxy of brilliant poets; but when we speak about "the poetry of the Revolution", we think first and foremost of Mayakovsky. "Mayakovsky" and "poet of the Revolution" have become synonymous. It is not only impossible to think of Soviet poetry without Mayakovsky, his personality, and example he gave, it is impossible even to imagine the epoch itself.

Mayakovsky's work is a well-spring of inexhaustible vitality, not only because the keen awareness of a new world being born was inherent in him, but because he had the ability, as a poet, to interpret correctly, in proportion and in perspective, the new phenomena of life while they were still in process of formation. This is the meaning behind the tendentiousness which he advocated so passionately. He wanted, by poetic means, with resounding words, and by lively personal example, to blaze a new trail for the poetry which was fighting for Communism:

*Proletarians*

*come to communism*

*from down under,*

*I—*

*from my poetic skies above*

*hurtle into communism—*

*tear asunder*

*me and it—*

*and I've no life, no love.*



In evaluating Mayakovsky, the criterion of Communism becomes vital in our time, when the greatest Soviet poet has won an enduring reputation as the most outstanding poet of the century and when attempts are being made at a "take-over bid" for him as a potential ally against Communism—a line being followed by the majority of foreign "Sovietologists".

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The controversy about the sources of Mayakovsky's strength and immortality is a controversy not only about the significance of this or that episode in his life, but about his traditions, about the place and meaning of poetry in society—in the final analysis, about the development of art. That is why this controversy has not died down, but is becoming increasingly urgent and important.

In recent years, it has become particularly evident that Mayakovsky (like Blok and Yesenin) was a poet of his century. The twentieth. And a very complex one. To study their heritage inevitably entails the most detailed and comprehensive study of the decades during which they developed and matured as artists.

The work of Mayakovsky, Blok and Yesenin—according to their individual natures—reflected the hopes and concerns of our times and a keen awareness of "unprecedented changes, unseen rebellions" approaching and accomplished. Mayakovsky did more than either of his two contemporaries for the victory and triumph of the new world. He saw the active involvement of poetry in making the new world, as a guarantee that his verse would step "over century and schism".

"There is no Blok the Symbolist, there is only Alexander Blok the great poet. There is no Yesenin the Imaginist, there is only Sergei Yesenin the great poet. There is no Mayakovsky the Futurist, there is only Mayakovsky the great poet," said Sergei Narovchatov in "A Word on Mayakovsky". This approach is both indicative and useful if we are to arrive at a contemporary interpretation of the heritage of these poets who have already achieved immortality.

Another important fact is that the recently awakening hopes (not without the "help" of certain critics) among some poets that in the search for innovation it is more fruitful to rely on the experiments of modernist "isms" than on the experience of Soviet poetry, has not produced the desired results. As far as Mayakovsky is concerned, this means acknowledging his innovations in their entirety, not merely at the early stage, and correctly identifying the chief source of his poetic reforms as the revolutionary processes which were changing the very course of history.

There is no need to obliterate Futurism or LEF from Mayakovsky's life. But the fact that he speaks aloud and straight even to the seventies, means that his significance must be measured by other yardsticks than were applied during his lifetime.

In the development of an artist, especially a great one like Mayakovsky, apart from the subjective factors (sympathy, antipathy, short-lived enthusiasms), participation in the historical process is of decisive significance. Mayakovsky's poetry became an integral part and a highly active catalyst of socialist culture, and this is something to which the Futurists could never lay claim.

This does not mean that Mayakovsky was innocent of contradictions or mistakes: he was first and foremost a human being; but they were the contradictions and mistakes of a bold originator who was blazing new trails and, moreover, who was never creatively at a loss. And how insignificant these contradictions and mistakes are compared with the magnitude of his achievement! He devoted his talents wholly to the affirmation of communist ideals. This is how Mayakovsky came to set such magnificent example of single-mindedness and integrity.

Mayakovsky may, without hesitation or qualification, be ranked with the brilliant and outstanding personalities, of which our epoch is justly proud. With their activity and their achievements, these people were creating a new age, and in this immeasurably heroic process of struggle and creation a new kind of man was being moulded and shaped.

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Time has made one more vital alteration to our ideas of the great Soviet poet.

In the early post-revolutionary years, even critics with a knowledge of literary history and a sensitivity to the "secrets" of poetry regarded Mayakovsky as a poet without precedent who had emerged independently of tradition. Mayakovsky and tradition—the juxtaposition seemed almost incongruous during his lifetime. These misconceptions were propagated with particular zeal by the Futurists, who claimed to represent the "spirit of the age" and to be the founders of a "new art" which they intended to build up on the ruins of all past culture. Even in our days, this version is passed off as the only true revolutionary one by the representatives of ultra-leftish views in the West.

Soviet literary scholarship has performed an invaluable service in that it has long ceased to attribute a decisive importance to the group manifestos which bore the poet's signature, even if he himself defended these manifestos at the time. The desire to penetrate into the essence of everything done by the poet, to understand its objective significance had already been shown by Lunacharsky, and Soviet

literary scholarship adopted this approach in the second half of the thirties. As time passed, it became increasingly clear that the poet whose work had become such an integral part of socialist culture, which draws on all the gains of mankind, also bore within him a superior culture which could not have come from nowhere. Research was done into the creative ties linking Mayakovsky with the classical heritage and folk art. This useful work was not without its excesses. There were also attempts to dilute in every way the traditions established by Mayakovsky: even the rhythms of his verse seemed, to some critics, little more than reproductions of the traditional metres, differing only from the latter in lay-out on the printed page.

No 20th-century poet, however, did as much as Mayakovsky to enhance the authority of poetry in the eyes of the millions. And he achieved this because he displayed the greatest talent in continuing all the richest traditions of classical literature, the one of renewing art by a direct approach to the prime source of creativeness — life, interaction with life, and impact on life. For him to make verse meant to "make life", influencing the mind and heart of the reader, his behaviour, his attitude to other people and to the world. Mayakovsky raised this revivifying tradition to new heights, bringing poetry closer to socialism, its epochal problems, and its day-to-day tasks.

His eagerness for poetry to participate more actively in the transformation of life impelled Mayakovsky to support, for a time, the Futurist theories of "art as the building of life" and "production art". But since he constantly tested all theories against life, he reinterpreted them so that of the cerebral postulations of his fellow Futurists there remained only the external, verbal envelope, which he filled with entirely new content. Thus, if the Futurists regarded the fusion of art and production as a step towards the liquidation of art, Mayakovsky saw the active involvement of art in life as a condition for enhancing art, especially poetry.

His orientation on the tradition of turning to life as the main requisite for the full development of art determined Mayakovsky's assessment of Pushkin (*Jubilee*), Lermontov (*Tamara and the Demon*), Saltykov-Shchedrin (satirical writings), and other classics. Hostile to imitation and copying, he did not deny the positive role of influence. Influence, however, should serve as the stimulus for a rivalry in which the new work did not lose its originality. Pushkin is one of the great poets of the past with whom Mayakovsky felt himself in a permanent state of rivalry.

The correct solution to the problem of the relationship between tradition and innovation in Mayakovsky's art is of great importance not only for the study of his own creative experience, but for the fruitful understanding and development of all Soviet poetry.

Contemporary Soviet poets consider themselves (with very few exceptions) as continuing in the Mayakovsky tradition, and they value his achievement highly. And these are not always the poets who declare themselves to be his direct heirs. Some of these lack breadth in their understanding of what was achieved by Mayakovsky and of the socially committed, Party allegiance which distinguished the progenitor of Soviet poetry.

Contemporary Soviet poetry, developing along the channel of a single method, has many stylistic currents. Not all of them originate in Mayakovsky, but this does not diminish his importance. No poet can afford to ignore the discoveries he made.

Of fundamental interest is the high opinion of Mayakovsky held by poets who, in the externals of style, cannot be included in the "Mayakovsky school". For instance, Yaroslav Smelyakov, with his own distinctive poetic individuality, temperament, and an attitude to writing which suggests a link with the classics of the last century rather than with Mayakovsky, wrote as follows:

"The influence of Vladimir Mayakovsky on Soviet and world poetry is indisputable. This is not simply a matter of techniques and the fact that many publish their verse in stepped lines and find, though not quite so frequently, unexpected rhymes. His influence is really much more extensive and inspiring. We have begun to publish far more frequently and far more responsibly in the newspapers, going out to face an audience of millions; the rhythms of our poetry have become freer and more varied. Our poetry is not embarrassed to tell the whole world that it serves the people, serves the Party, and thinks only of carrying out its work more brilliantly, more intelligently, more talentedly. We are not afraid of being the Party's agitators; we are only afraid of being dull agitators."

It would be possible to quote endless authoritative testimonials of Mayakovsky's influence on the creative art of the fraternal republics and the socialist countries. I will confine myself to two examples. "Almost every Byelorussian poet tells how much Mayakovsky means to him," writes Petrus Brovka, and he quotes Kondrat Krapiva: "Mayakovsky burst upon our poetry like a thunder-shower, beneficially watering its soil and cleansing the air of the musty views and concepts which were still so numerous during his lifetime." "In popularity, Mayakovsky holds his own with the national poets of Bulgaria.... He has become a favourite of the Bulgarian reading public and a teacher to the Bulgarian poets" (Nikola Antonov).

Poetry, like any other aspect of human effort, needs the perfection and enrichment of its techniques. Special studies have been devoted to Mayakovsky's innovations in diction, metre and rhyme, and to the originality of the genres he evolved. There is not a single controversy

about poetry — and there have been a great many in recent times — in which the place of honour has not been awarded to Mayakovsky. But perhaps his most indisputable service was in changing the whole “climate of poetry”. Here every bit as important as the various innovations in style and prosody were the living example, the socially committed and moral passion, the striking ideological sense of purpose, the lofty self-denial.

He was indeed a “craftsman on the grand scale”, as Yaroslav Smelyakov wrote. And this tradition of Mayakovsky’s, the concern with craftsmanship is becoming particularly significant today.

Our literature, which reflects the most human forms of social life, the highest consciousness, and the most progressive type of human conduct in modern conditions, naturally also needs the most advanced, flexible, exact and rich artistic methods possible. That is why the problem of technical skill is *consciously* brought to the foreground in the art of socialist realism as one of paramount importance. A knowledge of Mayakovsky’s skill with words, rhythm, rhyme and metaphor is very important in the struggle for the improvement of poetic quality.

True discoveries, as we can tell from the whole of Mayakovsky’s experience, occur when the demands of poetry and life intersect.

The roads to artistic masterpieces are particularly complex and manifold, and creative talent is only one of the ingredients for success. This talent comes truly into its own when it achieves the *poetry of life itself*, or the poetry of struggle for the transformation of life. And this, indeed, is the hardest thing of all. We often accept what has been discovered by the poet in its final and complete form, not always taking an interest in how the poet and all his poetry reached this culmination. How else to explain the attitude, superficially respectful but lacking due penetration into the essentials, towards the historical role of agitation poetry, the unsurpassed masters of which were Mayakovsky and Demyan Bedny? And Yaroslav Smelyakov is right to associate mass verse agitation with Mayakovsky’s declaration: “The streets are our paint-brushes. The squares are our palettes.”

Traditions exist in art in various ways. It cannot be said that Mayakovsky’s rhyming captions to the ROSTA posters excite the reader of today as much as a poem like *Aloud and Straight*. They did their job and are worthy to take an honourable place among the other documents of the age, if they are to be judged in isolation from the poet’s other works. But one would have to be poetically deaf not to hear the pulse of Mayakovsky’s *agitkas* for ROSTA beating in the poems *It*, *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*, *Fine!*, and *Aloud and Straight*. And if the poets of our time are entitled to be proud that they represent the poetry of the new world, it should be remembered that the main road to it was built by Mayakovsky and Demyan Bedny, the most outstanding

political poets of our time. It was on this road that the most far-reaching discoveries were made, though this is not always obvious at first glance.

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The adjective "political" has come to be used in close and lasting association with Mayakovsky's poetry. So lasting, in fact, that it is often mentioned automatically, without a clear awareness of its profound significance. It would hardly be surprising, therefore, if so impoverished a conception were not seen at a disadvantage when compared with poetry which supposedly throws light on the more profound and more human topics—moral, psychological, and so on. In reality, there are no substantial grounds whatever for drawing such a contrast.

Mayakovsky is, perhaps, one of the most brilliant political poets who ever lived. There is much truth in Vassily Fyodorov's remark: "Until Mayakovsky, there was never a personality so freedom-loving and so politically passionate. Mayakovsky is the poet of the open programme."

This peculiarity of Mayakovsky's talent enabled him to be keenly sensitive to the unprecedented newness of everything that happened in the country after October, and stimulated him not only to seek for correspondingly new *artistic* forms in which to record the tremendous changes in the destiny of millions and in the movement of world history, but incessantly to concern himself with the most effective forms for poetry's direct and on-the-spot *participation* in the transformation of the world. And if it would be a mistake to canonise all the ways and means tried out by the poet, this concern itself and the stimuli behind it should be passed down by successive generations of poets.

However, it is not only a matter of this aspect, however brilliant, of Mayakovsky's talent. It was also germane to him in *Cloud in Pants*, impressive in its volcanic eruption of feelings, and yet still not notable for the fire of political passion or for the sense of purpose which this passion acquired after October. Of considerable and decisive significance is the *nature of the political policy* which conquered the poet's imagination.

This was the political policy of Lenin and the Leninist party.

For Mayakovsky, the Leninist policy was a force transforming life and thus able to transform poetry, revitalise it, enrich it, and inspire it. But for this it was necessary to destroy something inherited from the past—the idea that politics never expressed the interests of the people and had always been inimical to art.



Mayakovsky reading the poem *Fine!* in the Polytechnical Museum (October 20, 1927).

Mayakovsky's conception of politics came to be identified with the image of Lenin and his activity. Politics for him, therefore, developed from a "disembodied world" into the expression of an "enormous, single truth". And he himself, taking his cue from Lenin, mercilessly denounced falsehood, phrase-mongering, and lack of principles. Mayakovsky found in Lenin's policy a magnificent combination of the most sober realism, which fixed attention on any minor detail ("a glance at a trifle—Lenin's orders"), with vision at its most inspired. But it was a special vision which could foretell the future and could see "what has been concealed by time". Finally, Lenin's policy became for him a living embodiment of humanism, stirring millions to the creation of history from a state of passivity, servility and enslavement.

This is all described with particular conviction in the poems *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* and *Fine!*

In placing such enormous hopes on politics for the renewal of art, Mayakovsky certainly did not consider it possible to use them as a

substitute for the direct study of life. Moreover, he saw Lenin's policy as a compass with which he could find his bearings in the highly complex processes of life.

Mayakovsky's impact on poetry was not limited to extending the possibilities of rhythm, use of rhyme and other aspects of prosody, but delved down to the very foundations of the poetic art, into its interaction with life.

Thanks to this approach, discovered by him in the process of participating with the spoken and written word in the creativeness of the masses, his discoveries in the art of poetry also found their true expression: rhythms capable of conveying the most complex transitions of thought and feeling, from dramatically tense and lyrical "self-expression" to live conversation and the impassioned rhetorical address; inner unusual rhymes; a free, but always carefully worked out, composition, capable of accommodating great thoughts invariably coloured by lively, spontaneous feeling; poetic cadences with a wide range of colouring from a warm, gentle, natural sincerity that enhanced the pathos, to the mercilessly scathing. Finally, his liking for hyperbole, which gave rise to so many misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

If one approaches the use of hyperbole from the historical angle, it was not a manner exclusive to Mayakovsky, but was engendered by the age. When Mayakovsky saw the Revolution as a second Flood which would wash over the cities of the world, he expressed feelings to which many were prone. Wrath and hope took on planetary dimensions, to such an extent was the old world discrediting itself and so strong was the thirst for change.

This has rightly been called romanticism. But if we fail to observe how Mayakovsky's keen interest in the Leninist policy influenced his literary romanticism, we restrict ourselves to abstract notions of his artistic method.

Mayakovsky's romanticism of the pre-October years was revolutionary in character because he contrasted the negation of the unacceptable reality with the dream of a free mankind worthy of a different life. But in the poet's very earliest romantic works about revolution, important new features appear: the contrast between dream and reality vanishes. Uppermost is a premonition of far-reaching changes—for the good of mankind—which were being made possible by the socialist revolution. The outlines of the new world are still blurred and indistinct, but the conviction that this world is coming into being with its message of liberation, humanity and truth—this is no longer a product of fantasy. Participation in the day-to-day constructive work on such "unpoetic" sectors as agitation and advertising set Mayakovsky's feet firmly on realistic ground and gave a clearly defined sense of



purpose to his romantic flights of fancy. The romanticism of the heroic re-creation of the world, to which the poet remained true to the end of his days, became fused with a realistic vision of the world, and both were shot through with a single communist ideal.

Mayakovsky constantly felt himself at the gateway to the shining, sunny—to use his adjective—world of the communist future. He had to deny access to external and internal enemies alike. Hence his satire. At the same time, this sunny world still had to be created, and on the poet's efforts—it was his awareness of this that added to his sense of responsibility—depended how soon this world would be created. Hence the "frankness", the agitation style, and the "programmatic" element in Mayakovsky's work. Hence, too, his devotion to the people and the Party.

Mayakovsky's Party feeling could be described as aggressively militant—I would even say exultant—allowing of no withdrawals, concessions, crafty evasions, or hopes of a "respite". Party allegiance for him was not an abstract ideological category, but the basis of all conduct, a humanist and moral criterion.

The same refusal to compromise distinguishes his work. That is why, when one speaks of Mayakovsky's craftsmanship (he often used this word himself), one feels that it does not quite convey the moral potential that was so characteristic of him. This criterion was discarded by his associates of LEF ("The poet is a craftsman and that's all there is to it," they affirmed). But poets who were indifferent to the essentials of their cause, who lacked a sense of responsibility to the people, and who were ready to be satisfied with "any odd word", were accused by Mayakovsky of immorality and degeneration. Craftsmanship was, for him, a moral responsibility.

This was because, at the bottom of everything he did, there was the *struggle for man*.

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Much has been written about Mayakovsky's humanism, and yet what matters most—his use of artistic means to encourage the social and moral qualities that go into the making of the "new man", the "socialist personality"—is only being disclosed now, in the conditions of developed socialism and the new historical community of people.

A few years ago, the poet Mikhail Lukonin rightly observed: "Mayakovsky's poetry was nourished by the highest demand of social communication; it arose out of his striving to make man better, more inspired, more subtle, more tough, more abundant in love; his poetry lived to convey to man the special something that was revealed to Mayakovsky himself, to delight him with the vision of the highest

communist goal, to inspire him with thoughts and feelings thanks to which Soviet life had made him happy."

In order fully to evaluate the meaning of this source—the highest demand of social communication—we should consider in what historical conditions this demand emerged and developed.

By the time Mayakovsky arrived on the literary scene, many progressive people of the age clearly saw that not only the Russian social system, but the whole of capitalist civilisation had entered on a period of decrepitude and was threatening man's very existence. For all the obvious achievements in science, technology, and industry, the "old world", however frantic its attempts to alter or at least slow down the course of history, was being compelled to retreat step by step and give way to the new socialist civilisation. Of the great writers of the time, Gorky realised this more clearly than anyone, since he was in the vanguard of the proletarian liberation movement. Gorky spoke of the destruction and disintegration of the human personality, a process about which bourgeois sociologists write to this day, though using the term "alienation" and trying to give it a universal character and apply it to the world of socialism too. But even by the dawn of the century, Gorky had already countered the destruction of the personality with the ideal of Man with a capital "M", showing the real road to his regeneration.

The young Mayakovsky also spoke up long and clear about the threat hanging over man and the world. The "leitmotif" of his pre-October poetry was the cry—down with a civilisation that ruins man, the most beautiful thing created by nature and history! Down with a civilisation which divides people among themselves and generates misanthropy and the horrors of loneliness.

The overcoming of alienation was a problem that had already confronted the young Mayakovsky. In the tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovsky* and in *Cloud in Pants*, the motif of universal happiness is inextricably interwoven with the theme of rebellion. Even then, Mayakovsky was beginning to realise that the socialist movement alone opened the way to flourishing of man's highest demand, the demand for commonalty, the fusing of the individual with humanity (the finale to the poem *War and Peace*).

It is natural that he should have emerged in the forefront of those artists who announced their mission to be active and direct participation in the tremendous process of welding people together, of forging new links and relationships. No epoch has ever faced an artist with such an enormous and complex task. And it was when literature took part in forming the new historical community of people that the most significant artistic discoveries were made—primarily in the attitude to man and in portraying him.

If we do not take these circumstances into consideration, it is easy to draw the mistaken conclusion that Mayakovsky did violence to his talent by suppressing his lyrical impulse (R. Jacobson); that, realising how complex and contradictory the world of personality is during a period of historic upheaval, he moved away from the portrayal of the real "living human being", from his own exploration of individual experience, and inclined towards social problems instead, which, it is claimed, were easier to solve.

In reality, the position was entirely different. The poetry of decadence concentrated at the beginning of the century on the spiritual confusion of the individual locked up inside his own world. This also helped signally in the destruction of the personality and the debasement of lyrical poetry. Mayakovsky, Blok and Yesenin were aware of this, and what makes their work so valuable to us is their efforts to break out of this fatal circle into the world of social interests and to merge their destinies with that of the people—not an easy thing to do in those years. Mayakovsky carried out an even more difficult task. This was well described by one of our poets who poked fun at the facile imitations of Mayakovsky: "It's easy to call yourself a follower of Mayakovsky, but just you try shouldering the great burden he bore."

Mayakovsky was the first of those to whose lot fell the labour of restructuring poetry, lyrical and epic, so that it could accommodate and express—while it was still being born—unknown to the people of the old world, feelings, thoughts and experiences of the new man who, in contrast to the man of the divided society, should be called a man who lives for other people. For such a man, everything that happens in the world becomes personal. Mayakovsky and the poets who followed him in his lifetime (A. Bezymensky, A. Zharov and others), or those working along similar lines (D. Bedny) laid the foundations of socialist lyrical poetry. Only as a result of the work done by them is it now possible to arrive at a successful solution to the moral and psychological problems raised by the period of developed socialism and to penetrate into the most subtle nuances of human experience without fear of a regression to individualism.

Alexander Tvardovsky once rightly observed that, thanks to Mayakovsky, the "tragic problem of the mutual relationship between the poet and the people" had disappeared from Russian poetry.

The 20th century is rife with unprecedented tragic collisions demanding close attention, study in detail, and responsible analysis. Never has the problem of historical justification and of the correct choice of a road loomed so large. Never have there been such valid conditions for historically justified optimism.

A great poet of the twentieth century, Mayakovsky clearly saw the tragic side of life. But neither before nor after the October Revolution

did he ever imagine himself to be a "tragic" ant, trapped between two banks. The message of all his post-revolutionary work is: "I am with those who have come out to build and cleanse", and "Life is marvellous, life is beautiful!" Beautiful, in spite of all obstacles to creation, in spite of all failures in love, personal troubles, or suffering. The first post-October play, *Mystery-Bouffe*, and the last finished long poem *Fine!*, are linked by motifs of light, of sunshine. Mayakovsky's thought was notable for political acuity and for historical scope and perspective; he clearly perceived the conflicts generated in some people by the change of historical formations and by their inability to choose the right course, and also by the conflicts unavoidable on the "most difficult march to Communism". That is why he never had any doubts about the rightness of that course.



**2**

***Soviet  
Authors  
on  
Mayakovsky***



To all who knew Mayakovsky personally, or at least from his public performances and writings, Mayakovsky was life.

Life!

Yes, I have no hesitation in identifying life itself with this big, powerful figure, somewhat clumsy in his great forcefulness and yet so mobile and assured, with the massive features always in repose.

Remember that whether Mayakovsky was laughing, or angry, or listening, or talking, he always preserved a kind of repose. The eternally unfinished cigarette in the corner of his mouth and a certain carelessness—"none of this is really worth bothering about anyway"—and the eyes, magnificent, attentive to everything going on round him.

Heine said of Goethe's eyes that the eyes of genius are always somewhat fixed.

I don't know whether this is invariably true, but I often noticed that Mayakovsky had this steady attention that was directed inwards and outwards simultaneously. And yet his eyes literally flashed fire.

I have no hesitation in equating "life" with that amazingly deep, bell-like voice. Mayakovsky's rhythms when reading aloud, and even when conversing, were always calm and stately, and under the calm stateliness there was power.

Yes, he was a well-spring of inexhaustible vitality, and yet he was always master of himself, always held in check by his own will-power. This was "life" in one of its extreme forms.

Mayakovsky's poetry is marked with the same rich, intense vitality.

The huge hunk of life that was Mayakovsky could not fit into pre-revolutionary, bourgeois upper-class mores, culture, or literature.

At one time, he became a social-democrat; then, as if unable to contain his youthful rumbustiousness within the framework of the underground, he changed his stance to become a free, rebellious individualist.

In poetry, this huge hunk of life could not take the well-trodden path. Rebellion!

His vivid nonconformity compelled many to think of Mayakovsky as a typical bohemian, a dissolute and unprincipled character, a mad-cup buffoon and eccentric, always striving for effect. But this was, in fact, only on the surface. From the very beginning, even as a young man, Mayakovsky was in reality a man of great will-power and great plans. Incidentally, even the purely external form of Mayakovsky's poetry, that which was aimed primarily at the "general public", fully conformed to type: "a huge hunk of life, of vital energy." The same impression was made by his flamboyant self-advertisement, his daring practical jokes, his irrepressible inventiveness, and the liberties he took with language, his disdainful self-assurance.



All this reducing of his positions to the absurd, all these youthful antics suited Mayakovsky as a representative of life and youth. He was often condescendingly prepared to play the role, imposed on him by public opinion, of a buffoon, a kind of highly talented and entertaining thug on the literary scene and, of course, there was the fury of life in all this, and in his yellow blouse too.

But behind the noisy and glittering exterior, the content of Mayakovsky's lyrics was, from the very start, far from as rowdily entertaining. From the very start, a warm and tender heart beat underneath it all.

There is no need to be afraid of saying what must be said. Mayakovsky was extraordinarily sensitive and tender-hearted, and he remained so until his last moments, as he recorded even in the verses he wrote before his death....

...Now, when I open any book of Mayakovsky's at any page, life invariably surges up and sweeps over me in a raging flood: a dazzling light, cruel to lovers of the dark, stabs like a searchlight beam.

*Shine up on high,  
shine down on earth,  
till life's own source runs dry—  
shine on—  
for all your blooming worth,  
so say  
both sun  
and I!*

It should now be particularly clear to us that, like every great poet (without this, poetry is simply inconceivable), Mayakovsky was sensitive to an extreme, that is, sensitive, tender and responsive to everything around him. He had an uncommonly flexible consciousness that was in a certain sense unbalanced; that is, the slightest external shock could set up a train of extremely complex mental processes.

Mayakovsky never cared for weeping in public, although he has such lines as "I'll weep for all, and for all I'll pay".

But he suffered great inner crises, including some of a purely personal nature. He sang from time to time of his love, of his personal love, of the romances in his life. He celebrated *It* in song at the very height of his revolutionary creativeness, and some of his adherents were duly shocked.

When he sang of his love affairs, he did so openly and proudly. And yet in *these* songs of his there was much bitterness and private heartbreak, completely absent when he was becoming the spokesman of the masses....

Mayakovsky on  
the Red Square  
(1922-1923).



...Time goes by and, as always with very, very important phenomena and people, especially great ones, everything incidental is forgotten and lost, and the main outlines, in which was recorded all that is most significant, move up into the foreground.

Mayakovsky gave Russian poetry a new form which, of course, will never encompass all our verse, but which is still one of the most powerful trends in proletarian poetry.

Mayakovsky moved away from the verse form borrowed from the artificial sphere of music. Music, of course, is a great art, but it is one of the most artificial imaginable. Music itself tries, without losing the idioms of its basic language (pure tones, harmonies), to adapt itself to life and reflect its true sound more accurately.

We shall not discuss further how legitimate this is in music; but it is, of course, more than legitimate in poetry.

Mayakovsky created a verse form which echoed our actual speech—in debate, in conversation, and especially in oratory.

The rhythms and cadences of his verse echo the roar of a great city, the majestic din of intensive production.

In essence, the rhythm of Mayakovsky's poetry is majestic. Particularly majestic were his poems when he recited them himself. The metre pounded like a giant steam-hammer; the words moved in march tempo, they were drawn up in battalions of steel.

And Mayakovsky's imagery?

Although not afraid occasionally to use images that were fantastic and high-flown, Mayakovsky much preferred to draw them from everyday life. And that he most certainly did! They are always highly original and surprising.

He sought them long and persistently; he always wanted an image to give the reader something which was completely new to him, and which took its rightful place in a chain of other images.

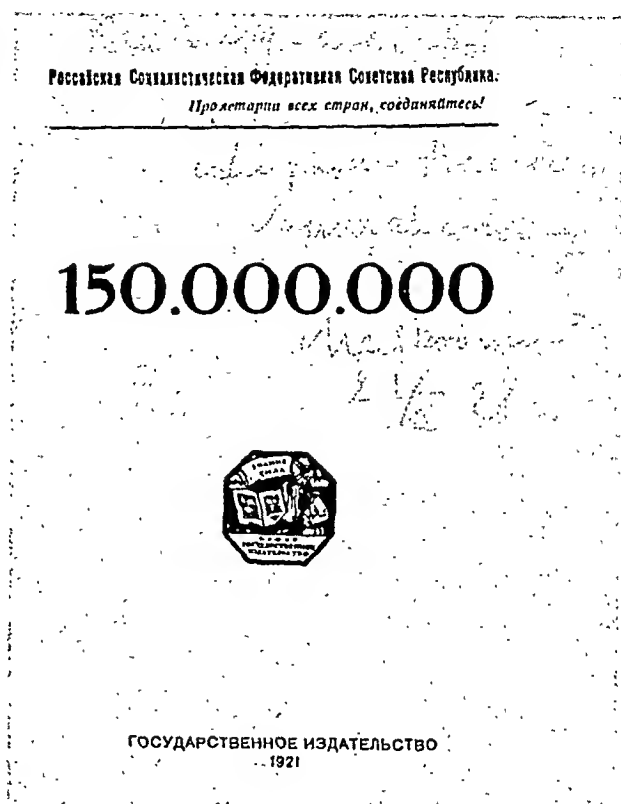
That is why Mayakovsky's pictures are extraordinarily vital; they are prosaic, yet they present the world in an unusual aspect in which we ourselves would never have seen it.

But most important of all is the ideological and emotional content of Mayakovsky's poetry. This cannot, of course, be dealt with in few lines of this short article. It is a world in itself.

But it is perfectly clear that from rebellious individualism, from the proud personality which began by disdainfully cutting itself off from the sordid milieu of the philistines, whether big or small, Mayakovsky stepped forward with giant strides to meet the Revolution halfway.

Mayakovsky was in love with the Revolution, and with each new song about it he seemed to be trying to prove his right to be one of its favourite suitors....

Cover for the first edition of the poem *150,000,000* with a presentation inscription to A. V. Lunacharsky (1926).



...It has been said many times that Mayakovsky's espousal of the proletarian cause was not a chance occurrence. This means that the prerequisites necessary for taking him in this direction existed within him, for in our times there are many people and not a few poets, but not all people, not all poets follow this road. However, this inner voice would never have led him as it did, if not for our times, for no one determines his own way, but the way of any man is determined, to a great extent, by his times and surroundings. In speaking of Mayakovsky's work and life, we speak of his encounter as an individual with the proletarian revolution as a gigantic social event.

The proletariat and its revolution existed in a latent form long before the October Revolution, and even before 1905. Mayakovsky knew of the existence of this great force and at times he came quite close to it in his everyday life, yet, during his early period, he was still quite

removed from it. One can say that when Mayakovsky embarked upon his career, he was still beyond the sphere of influence of this gigantic social body, the revolutionary proletariat. The first step Mayakovsky took on the road to revolution, in the broad sense of the word, was renouncing and attempting to destroy that which existed and trying to substitute instead something that was better and nobler.

Mayakovsky often provides definitions and self-portraits in which he says that he, Mayakovsky, is too big for the surroundings in which he must live....

...Mayakovsky did all he could to pave the way for the man of the future.

This was the starting point from which Mayakovsky began his fight for the big man in pre-revolutionary times. There was no road to the future in the bourgeois world, there were no entities of social order, of the collective which he could come to love, there was only a petty-bourgeois void, and it was against this petty-bourgeois void that he protested.

There were some social notes in Mayakovsky's protest from the very start. However, the essence of this protest was: the world is too shallow to accept a great individual, and the great individual rejects with indignation and disgust this shallow world, this mercenary world, pulverised as it is to a bourgeois level. This was Mayakovsky's first revolt.

Mayakovsky's second revolt resulted from his youth. It was not a matter of a man being young and, therefore, loving to behave defiantly, like a cock-of-the-rock, towards others. No, youth meant something else to Mayakovsky: he felt that the world he had been born into, and of which he had become an integral part, was old and decrepit. It had its own famous personages and museums, revered by all, but these famous personages and museums served only to sanctify and bless the worthless, decrepit world in which he lived.

Mayakovsky realised full well that there were priceless treasures in mankind's past, but he feared that if these treasures were acknowledged, all the rest must, therefore, be acknowledged, too. Therefore, it was better to revolt against everything and say: We are our own ancestors! May our youth proclaim its own young words, such as will make it possible to rejuvenate society and the world!...

...His third revolutionary step was born of his skill and, first and foremost, of his skill in the formal sense of the word. He felt in himself a great love for words, he felt that words obeyed him, that they formed into battalions at his command. He was carried away by this power he had over words. He felt that if a person did not know how to command words, but merely repeated what others had done before, he was like a conductor who comes to a well-rehearsed orchestra and waves his



Mayakovsky and A. V. Lunacharsky coming out of the Hall of Columns at the House of Soviets.

baton after the musicians have already played a particular phrase, while the listeners think he is conducting. Such a state of affairs is similar to one in which an epigonus thinks he is writing new poems, while he is actually possessed by old words and thoughts. Mayakovsky was always exasperated by formal impotency, and he said that one should write in an entirely new way. He did not yet know what this new way would be, in form and content, but, above all, it had to be new. And he who would write according to the old tenets should be castigated as a servant of the decrepit world....

...Mayakovsky became a revolutionary *per se* at a very early age. He often visualised the revolution as a desired but vague, tremendous blessing. He could as yet not define it more clearly, but he knew that it was a gigantic process of the destruction of the hated present and the creative birth of the magnificent and desired future. And the faster, the more turbulently and more mercilessly this process progressed, the happier the big man Mayakovsky would be. And then he came face to face with the proletariat, the October Revolution and Lenin; he came

upon these tremendous phenomena on his life's road and, taking a close look at them, though keeping aloof at first, he saw that this was his place in life, that this was what he had been yearning for, a direct realisation of the gigantic process of reconstruction! And he advanced, as well as he could, to meet this movement; he decided to become, as far as possible, a true proletarian poet. And all that was best in him, all that was great in him, all that was social, all that produced three-quarters of his poetry and which constituted the essence of his work, all this was truly heading towards the proletariat and would have completely won over all the other elements of his nature and would have perhaps given us, as a result, a true proletarian poet....

...Long after the Revolution has done its work, when there is full socialism and full communism, people will speak of the era in which we live as a most amazing era. That is why all of us who are living in this era should remember that we cannot disgrace this era by weakness, for it is truly an amazing era and one must work very hard towards self-improvement to have the right to say that one is, in a small way, its worthy contemporary. In his main writings and social work Mayakovsky can be just such a worthy contemporary, and he has many allies. First, these allies are his books, his works. They sing loudly, they shine and warm us, and their light is so strong that all the various owls and bats must hide in far corners, as from the rising sun, until the light picks them out there as well. Secondly, we are his allies. When I say "we" I do not mean myself and my friends, not the Communist Academy or the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, but the "we" which now comprises the creative revolutionary vanguard of humanity, becoming ever more its numerically superior basis. This is the "we", the "we" of our times, of the 1910s, 20s, 30s and 40s of our century, this is the "we" that is now fighting, creating, living, here in the USSR and spreading to all the world. It proclaims itself to be an ally of Mayakovsky, not an ally of Mayakovsky's double, but an ally of the Mayakovsky in whom his socio-political personality became crystallised. Perhaps it did not bring to perfection the poet we dream of, but it has covered a tremendous distance towards such a one. That is why we consider ourselves to be his allies and have the right to say so without shame, as perhaps we could not have done if we had forced our brotherhood and union upon a great person individually, and not on behalf of this collective, this creative "we", since, as concerns each individual, no matter how great, the warmth of comradeship is a great happiness when it is the lot of the living, and even when it is the lot of the deceased.

My relations with the Futurists at that time were complex: I hated their sermonising, but I loved them as people and I loved them for their talent.

In my view, they represented those nihilistic tendencies in poetry which I hated and which aimed at the total obliteration of that penetrating and brilliantly refined lyrical poetry of which Russian literature can rightly feel proud before all the literatures in the world. At the same time, many individual pieces by Elena Guro, Vassily Kamensky, Velimir Khlebnikov, David Burlyuk and others, were in my opinion often genuine works of art, and I could not feel myself in agreement with the scurrilous newspaper attacks which anathematised not only Futurism, but the Futurists themselves.

In spite of my disrespect for Igor Severyanin's perfumed motifs, I much appreciated his charmingly melodious lyrics and was thrilled by the verbal music of many of his admittedly affected poems.

This explains why, although the Futurists were officially at war with me on the stage and in their public appearances, and although in their many manifestos they attacked me savagely, lumping me in with the general mob of their bitter enemies, we were on good terms in real life, in the ordinary way of things, behind the scenes. The Futurists readily visited me in my solitude in Kuokkala, read me their opuses in manuscript, appeared with me before various audiences, and so on. I tried to explain my ambivalent attitude to them in a lengthy article on which I worked all the summer of 1913. I did not say much about Mayakovsky because, from the few verses which he had published by then, he seemed to me quite different from the rest of the group to which he belonged: behind the eccentricities of the Futurist imagery I sensed a genuine human longing incompatible with the noisy bravado of his public stage utterances. It may be that I interpreted some of his verses of that time too subjectively, but I felt that they were above all an expression of pain:

*It is my soul—  
the shreds of a torn-up cloud -  
in the burnt-out sky  
hung on the rusty cross of a belfry!*

.....  
*I'm lonely as the one remaining eye  
of a man soon going to join the blind!*

For me, the whole of Mayakovsky at that time was coloured by these lines....

...Every time I came to Moscow, we met frequently, almost every day; but our relationship at that time had not settled down. Mayakovsky was what is called a member of the chorus. He considered himself one of the Futurists—Khlebnikov, Vassily Kamensky,



K. I. Chukovsky.  
Cartoon by Ma-  
yakovsky (1915).



Рисунок к поэме Маяковского  
"Тучи" и стиху "Смерть".

Левый лист  
1915

Kruchenykh, David Burlyuk, Kulbin. I was an outsider and certainly no sympathiser of theirs. They naturally assessed every writer by his attitude to Futurism, which was alien to me, but which, I repeat, did not prevent me from being on friendly terms with them, appreciating many of their verses and drawings, and paying due acknowledgement to their personal talents.

Mayakovsky wanted me to love his cause, but I loved only the man himself. This wasn't enough for him. People at that time only interested him in one respect — whether they were friends or foes. I was neither, and almost as soon as Mayakovsky sensed this, he drifted away from me....

...In the winter of 1913, I was in Luna-Park, in the former Komissarzhevskaya Theatre. I was standing in the orchestra pit with Khlebnikov and other Futurists, watching Mayakovsky's tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, in which he was playing the lead himself. The

theatre was packed to capacity. They had been expecting a terrific scandal and had come to be shocked, to be annoyed, to shake their fists, to whistle; but what they heard was a nostalgic, lyrical voice complaining with passionate sincerity of the cruelty and meaninglessness of life around.

Most of the audience were disappointed, but on that day it became clear to a few that a powerful lyric poet had appeared in Russia. He always seemed ashamed of his own lyricism — "my soul wrapped in a yellow blouse from the public stare"—and people who saw him on stage during his aggressive performances never even guessed how humble and even shy he was when talking to those he cared for.

It has become usual to assert that the title for the tragedy came up by chance owing to a misunderstanding; if this was so, then chance was on his side: after all, the chief protagonist of the tragedy is Mayakovsky himself, and so it was natural to call it *Vladimir Mayakovsky* (I think he was also influenced by Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*)....

...Mayakovsky and I never once discussed politics at that time. He was apparently wrapped up in his poetic mission. He made me translate Walt Whitman to him aloud, he studied Innokenti Annensky and Valery Bryusov, with some derision but very carefully, joined with extreme interest into the controversy between the Symbolists and the Acmeists, spent hours with me in my study looking through Apollon and Vesny, and as before, tramped whole miles polishing his *Cloud in Pants*:

...barefoot cutter of diamond stanzas.

I was therefore very much amazed when, a year later, after the outbreak of war, he wrote in the peace and quiet of the country the verses in which he prophesied that the victory of the Revolution was near.

The rest of us did not feel it coming and we did not understand his grim warnings. I will say more: in the tiny Kuokkala country theatre which belonged to Albert Puni, the father of the artist Ivan Albertovich Puni with whom Mayakovsky was friendly, when I read a short lecture on Mayakovsky's poetry before he recited his own poems, I didn't fully understand my own claims for him.

I said: "He is a poet of catastrophes and convulsions"; but I never realised what catastrophes. I quoted his frenzied lines:

*I clamour to bricks,  
plunging the dagger of frenzied words  
into the sky's swollen flesh,*

and only saw in them a "piercing cry about the woes of the world"; I didn't understand their inner alarm. This cry about the woes of the

world so agitated me, that I tried in that tiny little country theatre to interpret Mayakovsky as a poet of world upheavals, still not realising which ones he meant.

I understood it later, when Mayakovsky exclaimed with the insight of genius:

*Where, curtailed, the eyes of mortals halt,  
at the head of starving hordes,  
I espy,  
crowned with the thorns of revolt,  
the year 1916 draws nigh.  
And I'm among you as its herald....*

...In the whole of his life and work, Mayakovsky rejected the image of the poet as a priest and prophet, a "messenger of mystery and faith", to be identified, among other things, by his "inspired" hair. Not wanting his portrait by Repin to have the "not-of-this-world" expression he hated so much, he preferred to make himself look ugly, shaving his skull until it was blue.

It is not known what has happened to this sketch by Repin. Unfortunately, I am rather hazy about the subsequent relations between Mayakovsky and Repin. I vaguely remember that in the winter of that year (or perhaps the year after), Mayakovsky, who was now living in Petrograd, called on me with Arkadi Averchenko, and we went to visit Ilya Yefimovich Repin at "Penaty". I don't remember how they met, Mayakovsky and Repin, or what they talked about. All I can recall is that at the round table in Repin's dining room, Vladimir Mayakovsky stood towering to his full height and read his poem *War and Peace* (not the whole of it, but bits and pieces), and Repin kept groaning with delight and exclaiming warmly "Bravo!".

What reserves of youth the seventy-year-old artist must have had to understand, appreciate and love Mayakovsky, for all his habits and set tastes!

After all, at the time Mayakovsky was accomplishing one of the greatest revolutions in the history of world literature. In his *Thirteenth Apostle*, he introduced into Russian literature a new and unheard-of plot, new and unheard-of rhythms, a new and unheard-of system of rhyming, a new syntax, and a new vocabulary.

There would have been nothing surprising about it if the totality of these innovations had frightened the old *peredvizhnik*. But behind the alien and unfamiliar forms of the verse, Repin, with the intuition of a great artist, immediately sensed a tremendous force in Mayakovsky and immediately understood about his poetry what at that time had not yet been realised by the magazine editors or by the professional critics.

...Although all people are visible in their full height when moving or stationary, this very circumstance seemed miraculous whenever Mayakovsky appeared and compelled all to turn and look at him. In his case, the natural seemed supernatural. The reason was not his height, but another peculiarity, more general and less tangible. He was, to a greater extent than other people, all in the appearance. There was as much that was expressed and final in him, as there was little in the majority who rarely, and even then only in the event of some special shock, emerge from the gloom of their unfermented intentions and unfulfilled propositions. He existed as if on the very day after an enormous spiritual life lived by him in reserve for all eventualities, and they all used to find him at the climax of its irreversible consequences. He would sit on a chair as on the saddle of a motor-cycle, lean forward, cut up and hastily gulp down a Wiener schnitzel, play at cards, rolling his eyes but without turning his head, promenade majestically down the Kuznetsky Most, intone in a nasal voice exceptionally profound snatches of his own and other people's work as if they were readings from the liturgy, scowl, grow in stature, travel, and perform in public; but deep down behind all this, as behind the straight run of an ice-skater who has picked up speed, one always sensed the day preceding all the other days of his life when he had been caught up in this amazing spurt which had straightened him out so hugely and unconstrainedly. Behind his bearing one sensed something like a decision when it has been implemented and the consequences are no longer subject to cancellation. And this decision was his genius, the encounter with which had once shaken him so profoundly that it had become to him for all time a thematic compulsion to which he had surrendered himself without pity or hesitation.

But he was still young, the forms that this theme was to adopt still lay ahead. The theme itself was insatiable, however, and would not tolerate postponement. And so in the very first stages he was impelled to anticipate his own future; and anticipation accomplished in the first person is a pose.

From these poses, as natural in the world of the higher expression as are the rules of decency in ordinary life, he selected a pose of external wholeness, the most difficult one for an artist to adopt and, in relation to friends and loved ones, the most noble. He maintained this pose with such perfection that it is now almost impossible to define what originally it concealed.

At the same time, the mainspring of his immodesty was a painful modesty, and his assumed will-power concealed a phenomenally hypochondriachal lack of will that was subject to causeless gloom. Equally deceptive was the machinery of the yellow blouse. He used it to fight, not the dinner jackets of the bourgeoisie, but the black velvet

Mayakovsky,  
photographed in  
1917.



of talent within him, the luxuriantly black-browed forms of which began to perturb him earlier than is usual with less gifted people. Because no one better than he knew all the banality of the rare fire when not gradually enraged by cold water, and that the passion sufficient for the continuation of the species is inadequate for creative art, because it needs passion demanded for the continuation of the *image* of the species, that is, it needs a passion which is inwardly like the passions and whose novelty is inwardly like a new promised land....

...The difficulty lay, not in becoming accustomed to him, but to the world he held in his hands, now setting it in motion, now rendering it inactive at a whim. I will never understand what he gained from demagnetising the magnet when, with all the externals preserved, not a particle was moved by the horseshoe which had hitherto been lifting on end any imagination and attracting with the measure of its lines any weights you might care to mention. It is unlikely that history can give any other example of a man who carried a new experiment so far and yet who renounced it so completely, at the hour predicted by him, when that experiment, even at the price of inconvenience, would have become so vitally necessary....

...His sympathies usually caused bewilderment. A poet with an arrestingly grand self-awareness who had gone further than anyone else in revealing the lyrical element and, with medieval boldness, bringing it closer to a theme in the unrestrained depiction of which poetry spoke in a language of almost sectarian identifications, he just as broadly and as grandly picked up another, more local tradition.

He saw below him a city slowly rising up towards him from the depths of the *Bronze Horseman*, *Crime and Punishment*, and Andrei Bely's *Petersburg*, a city lost in a mist which was called, with unnecessary vagueness, the problem of the Russian intelligentsia; but it was, in fact, a city obscured by eternal speculations about the future, a Russian city of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

He embraced such vistas, and along with these huge speculations was faithful, almost as if in duty bound, to all the dwarf enterprises of his haphazard, hastily collected and always almost indecently mediocre clique. A man with an almost animal lust for the truth, he surrounded himself with small-time hangers-on, squeamish people of fictitious reputations and of false and unwarranted pretensions. Or, to name what is most important of all. To the very last, he went on seeing something in the veterans of a movement which he had obliterated finally and for all time....

...Time and influences in common brought me close to Mayakovsky. We had our coincidences. I noticed them. I realised that if I didn't do something about myself, they would become more frequent in future. He had to be protected from their banality. Unable to define it, I

decided to renounce what encouraged this banality. I renounced the romantic manner. Thus was achieved the unromantic poetic style of *Over the Barriers*.

But the romantic manner, which I eschewed from now on, concealed a whole interpretation of life. This was the interpretation of life as the life of the poet. It came down to us from the Symbolists after having been absorbed by the Symbolists themselves from the Romantics—German, for the most part.

Blok was preoccupied with this conception only for a short while. It could not satisfy him in the form in which it was peculiar to him. He had either to intensify it or discard it. He parted company with the conception. It was Mayakovsky and Yesenin who intensified it.

In his symbols, that is, in everything that, in terms of imagery, was contiguous with Orphism and Christianity in this poet, who set himself up as a criterion of life and paid for doing so with his own life, the romantic interpretation was overwhelmingly vivid and incontrovertible. In this sense, something intransitory was epitomised in Mayakovsky's life; and also in Yesenin's fate, for which no adjectives will suffice, but which self-destructively sought and found the world of fairy tale....

...I was impressed by Mayakovsky: poetry, the Revolution, the turbulent Moscow streets and the new art, dreamed of by the habitués of *La Rotonde* in Paris—he found room for them all. I even thought that he might help me to find my true course. But things turned out differently: Mayakovsky was, for me, an enormous phenomenon both in the poetry and in the life of the age, but he never influenced me directly, always seeming so near and yet so infinitely remote.

Perhaps this is a peculiarity of genius, or perhaps it was a peculiarity of Mayakovsky's character: he used to say that poets must be "varied". He was the driving force of *LEF*, *Novy LEF* and *REF*; he wanted to attract and unite many people, but he found himself surrounded only by his admirers and, sometimes, hangers-on. He once told how he talked to the Sun at a country villa near Moscow; but he was himself a sun round which the satellites spun in orbit.

I met him in Moscow in 1918 and 1920, and in Berlin in 1922, and then in Paris, and again in Moscow, and then again in Paris (we met for the last time in the spring of 1929—the year before his death). Our meetings were sometimes brief, sometimes significant. I want to talk about Mayakovsky as I understood him. I know that this account will be one-sided and subjective, but can the testimony of a contemporary be anything else?...

...I want above all to talk about the man. He was certainly not a "monolith", but he was big and complex, with tremendous will-power and with a tangle of sometimes contradictory feelings....

...To the end of his life, he retained certain traits, perhaps it would be more accurate to say certain habits, of his early youth. Critics do not like to dwell on his "Futurist period", although without those first lyrics his longer poems are meaningless. But I am talking about the man, not about his poetry. Soon, of course, Mayakovsky discarded not only the yellow blouse, but the slogans of the early Futurist manifestos. However, he still retained the spirit which dictated *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*—in his manner of behaving, in his jokes, in his retorts to criticism.

I remember the Poets' Café in Moscow during the winter of 1917-18. It was in Nastasinsky Pereulok. Lunacharsky came in. He sat down quietly at one of the far tables and listened. Mayakovsky invited him to speak. Anatoly Vassilyevich declined. Mayakovsky insisted: "Repeat what you told me about my poems...." And so Lunacharsky had to speak. He talked of Mayakovsky's talent, but criticised Futurism and mentioned the undesirability of self-advertisement. Then Mayakovsky said that a monument would be raised to him one day—right where the Poets' Café stood.... Vladimir Vladimirovich was only a few hundred metres out: his statue was put up not very far away from Nastasinsky Pereulok.



Immodesty? Self-confidence? These questions were often asked by many of Mayakovsky's contemporaries. He celebrated, for instance, the twelfth anniversary of his own poetic activity. He referred to himself more than once as the greatest poet. He demanded recognition in his lifetime. This was to do with the epoch, with the casting down of "idols", about which Balmont complained, and with the desire to attract attention to art by any possible means.

Mayakovsky could not bear to see a horse being flogged. Once, in a café, a friend of mine cut his finger on a knife. Vladimir Vladimirovich hurriedly turned away. Self-confident? Certainly, he reacted violently to criticism and insulted his literary enemies. I remember the following exchange. Comment: "Your verse doesn't warm, excite, or infect." Answer: "I'm not a stove, the sea, or the plague." On his own books he used to inscribe for the readers: "For internal consumption only." This is all generally known. But there was something else not so well known.

I remember a Mayakovsky evening in the Café Voltaire in Paris. Among those present was L. N. Seifullina. This was in spring 1927. Someone in the audience shouted: "Now read your *old* poems!" Mayakovsky, as always, joked his way out of it. When the evening was over, we went to an all-night café near the Boulevard Saint-Michèle: Mayakovsky, L. N. Seifullina, Elsa Triolet, and others. There was music and someone was dancing. Vladimir Vladimirovich joked, mimicked the poet Georgi Ivanov, who had been among Mayakovsky's audience earlier, then fell silent for some time, looking darkly in all directions like a caged lion. He and I arranged that I should call on him next morning—the earlier the better. In his tiny room at the Hotel Istria, where he always stayed, the bed had not been slept in. He met me gloomily and at once, without greeting me, asked: "Do you also think I wrote better earlier?..." He was never self-confident: the set pose deceived once and for all. I think it was dictated by reason rather than by character.

Romanticism was inherent in him, he was ashamed of it, and would cut himself short: "Who hasn't philosophised about the sea?" (after bitter reflections about his life), and then, ironically: "Just a lot of water." In the article "How Is Verse to Be Made?" everything seems cut and dried. In fact, Mayakovsky was well acquainted with the agonies invariably connected with creative art. He talked in detail about workpieces of rhyme: he also had other "workpieces" which he didn't care to mention: these were agonies of the soul. He wrote in a poem before he died: "Love's boat has foundered on reality." This was a tribute to the romanticism he had derided so often: in fact, his life had foundered on poetry. Addressing posterity, he admitted what he did not want to tell his contemporaries:

Yet I—  
                  *I trampled,*  
                                  *myself to quell,*  
on the very throat  
                                  *of my verse.*

He seemed exceptionally tough, healthy, and life-loving. But he was sometimes unbearably gloomy. He was prey to morbid hypochondria: he carried a soap container in his pocket and, when he had to shake hands with someone whom he found physically unpleasant in any way, he would immediately go out and carefully wash his hands. In cafés, he drank hot coffee through the straw usually served with iced drinks so as not to touch the glass with his lips. He ridiculed superstition, but he was always guessing and he adored gambling games—heads or tails, odd or even. There were roulette slot-machines in the Parisian cafés. You could put five sous on the red, the green, or the yellow. If you won, the machine paid out a token with which you could buy a cup of coffee or a glass of beer. Mayakovsky used to stand at these machines for hours. When he left, Elsa Triolet inherited hundreds of these tokens. He didn't need them: what he needed was to guess which colour would come up. And he left one round in his revolver—odd or even....

...When he was eighteen, Mayakovsky entered an arts college: he wanted to become a painter. He kept a painter's vision of the world even in his poetry: his images are not thought up, but seen. He loved painting and he felt it; he also loved the artists' milieu. He saw the world rather than heard it. (He used to joke that an elephant had stepped on his ear.)...

...I happened to read some articles about Mayakovsky written abroad in which the authors attempted to prove that the Revolution had destroyed the poet. It would be hard to imagine a bigger blunder: had there been no Revolution, there would have been no Mayakovsky. In 1918, he rightly called me a "frightened intellectual"; it was to take me two more years to understand what was happening. But Mayakovsky understood and accepted the Revolution at once. He was not merely carried away, he was wholly absorbed in building the socialist society.

He was never at odds with the Revolution; this is a fabrication by people who will stoop to anything in the fight against Communism. Mayakovsky's drama was not in the clash between the Revolution and poetry, but in LEF's attitude to art.

Mayakovsky loved Léger; they had something in common in their understanding of art's role in the contemporary society. Léger was enthusiastic about machines and urbanism, he wanted art in everyday life; he didn't visit the galleries. He painted his canvases and did fine

*Тов. Фурманову  
доктору Помп.- акушеру  
от колосского Левадецкого  
Медика*

**ЛЕФ** *За  
декабрь*

*В. Маяковский  
4/12/24*

**ЖУРНАЛ  
ЛЕВОГО ФРОНТА  
ИСКУССТВ**

**№ АВГУСТ  
ДЕКАБРЬ 4**

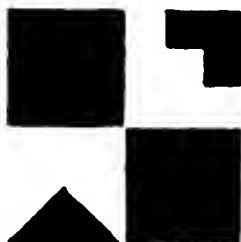
**ОТВЕТСТВЕННЫЙ РЕДАКТОР  
В. В. МАЯКОВСКИЙ**

**ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЕ ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО  
МОСКВА 1924 ПЕТРОГРАД**

Cover of the journal LEF No. 4, 1924, with a presentation inscription to D. Furmanov.

Cover for the first  
separate edition  
of the article *How  
Is Verse to Be  
Made?* (1927).

# МАЯКОВСКИЙ КАК ДЕЛАТЬ СТИХИ



■ ■ ■  
БИБЛИОТЕКА „ОГОНЕК“

№ 273

АКЦ. ИЗД. О-ВО „ОГОНЕК“

Москва — 1927

work, decorative, as it seemed to me, in no way undermining our love for Van Gogh or Picasso, but indisputably bound up with the new age. Mayakovsky struggled against poetry for a number of years, and not solely in manifestos or articles; he wanted to annihilate verse with verse. *LEF* published a death sentence on art—on “so-called poets”, “so-called artists”, “so-called theatre directors”. Instead of easel-paintings, artists were recommended to concern themselves with the aesthetics of machines, textiles and utensils; directors were to organise public festivals and demonstrations and abandon the stage;

the poets were to drop lyrical verse and write for the papers, think up captions for posters, and compose advertising copy.

Renouncing poetry proved difficult. Mayakovsky was a strong and courageous man. However, he sometimes deviated from his own programme. In 1923, when *LEF* was still rejecting lyrical verse, Mayakovsky wrote *It*. Even his intimates failed to understand the poem, and his allies attacked it as well as his literary enemies; but he had given something new to Russian poetry.

As the years went by, he weakened in his resolve to refute the art of the past. At the end of 1928, *Novy LEF* reported that Mayakovsky had publicly announced: "I am granting Rembrandt an amnesty." Let me recall once again that he died young. He lived, thought, felt, and, indeed, wrote according to no plan—he was first and foremost a poet. I remember the joy with which he spoke of the new, industrial beauty of America in those remote years, when the electrification of our country was still only an intention and when dim little lanterns used to burn in the dark, snow-covered Teatralnaya Square: "Children are the flowers of life." I met him when he returned from America. Yes, of course, Brooklyn Bridge was fine; yes, there were a lot of cars. But there was so much barbarism and inhumanity too! He swore, and then said how overjoyed he had been when he saw the tiny little gardens of Normandy. The *LEF* programme prompted the rejection of Paris where each house is a fragment of the past, and the praise of the doubly new and industrialised America. But Mayakovsky cursed America and, unashamed of seeming sentimental, declared himself in love with Paris. What was behind the contradiction? *LEF* was a magazine which had been running for several years, but Mayakovsky was a major poet. In his manifesto poems, he ridiculed Pushkin's heirs and the visitors to the Louvre, but he was enthralled by *Yevgeni Onegin* and the old masters.

He realised at once that the October Revolution had changed the course of history, but he saw the details of the future in symbolic terms: not on a canvas, but on a poster. We are not so easily seduced by the hygienic idyll of the last act of *The Bedbug*. To Mayakovsky, the art of the past was not so much alien as doomed. His iconoclasm was a testament and an act of heroism....

...Mayakovsky's fate in the world has been remarkable. Quite recently some black African writers were talking to me about him—he has reached them too! He is going all round the world. Of course, poetry is difficult to translate, and much in the form which Mayakovsky claimed to be the form of the future has become that of the past. But as man and poet, he is as young as ever. Neither Aragon, nor Pablo Neruda, nor Eluard, nor Tuwim, nor Nezval have ever written "à la Mayakovsky"; but they all owe Mayakovsky a great deal;

Cover of the first edition of the poem *It*.



he did not teach them new forms of prosody, but he taught them the courage of choice.

It is necessary to be able to separate contemporaneity from typicality, and the spirit of innovation from novelties of one kind or another which seem old-fashioned a quarter of a century later. A few months ago, one poet was saying to me that it was impossible to use double-vowel rhymes after the complex rhymes of Mayakovsky. This, of course, is naïve. One may use double-vowel rhymes, or no rhymes at all. In 1940, nine-tenths of the aspiring poets were writing in "stepped" lines; now they imitate other models: fashions change. Mayakovsky was beaten over the head with tomes of Pushkin,

Photo-copy of the  
manuscript of the  
poem II.

лишь редь  
звонит буржуазия ружья  
Посрещи меня!  
Король же эго!  
Ано скресе.  
Свое дохнул кошу!  
Эго в ке было любовь амура на  
землихуе  
но кори  
либав  
Посрещи крохоту  
в сраб в асманка  
эго в селі в селіхуе мис. тобто.  
Эго в селі  
который король сраб  
не кри сраб и сраб мис  
эго в селі  
но первый эго:  
— Покорный!  
обращающаяся земли.  
Эго в селі  
не в первую землю сраб  
эго в селі  
в родне  
оружие  
сраб  
оруж  
но крайней мере, марш  
земли по крайней мере, сраб  
сраб  
1/2 23

Nekrasov and Blok. Should we cudgel the young with volumes of Mayakovsky?

I have said that Mayakovsky could have helped me to sort out many of my problems. I remember a conversation one night in February or March 1918. We had just left the Poets' Café together. Mayakovsky was asking about Paris, Picasso, Apollinaire. Then he said that he liked my verses about the execution of Pugachev. "You ought to be pleased, and you're frowning.... That's bad!" I willingly agreed: "Of course it's bad." Politically, he was right, as I soon realised. But we always thought and felt differently. In 1922, he told me that he liked *Jurenito*: "You've understood a great deal, and better than the others...." I laughed: "But I still feel I don't understand anything at all yet...." We often met, but not once did we ever agree.

I thought, and still do, of Mayakovsky: sometimes I quarrel with him, but I am always thrilled by his poetic achievement. I don't look at his statue—the statue stands motionless on its pedestal; but Mayakovsky is on the move—round the new quarters of Moscow, round old Paris, all over our planet he goes with his "work-pieces"—not of new rhymes, but of new thoughts and feelings....



A peculiarity of Mayakovsky's talent and, perhaps, one of the main pointers to the popularity of his writings, is that he was not merely undisturbed but, was, on the contrary, helped by what he found necessary and inseparable from work—the noise of life around him, street traffic, all the manifold impressions which were not extraneous to the creative process. Mayakovsky did not need the peace and quiet of the study, isolation, or silence for preliminary work. He never went into hiding, never shut himself away, never arranged an artificial isolation for himself.

Following the course of his work with understandable interest, I often noticed that Mayakovsky, who was extremely witty and observant in conversation, sometimes suddenly became abstracted, answered in monosyllables, and even irrelevantly, as if inwardly resolving his affairs, but he did not entirely lose touch with what was happening around him. This was his way of doing the preparatory work on something that had occurred to him.

He carried the rough drafts of his verse around in his head and very seldom got as far as entering them in his notebooks. In the overwhelming majority of instances, we only find the fair copy in them, compared with which the published version, if it differed at all, only did so in very minor details.

Originality and power of expression in the most telling and fewest possible words. A distaste for polished, tortuous literary phrasing and the compound sentence. Accuracy and directness of expression which was enhanced by unusual structure.

This called for verbal imagery and the stressing of the most important points, that is, exaggeration, the highlighting of certain definitions by compression, and the omission of incidentals. This phrase and sentence structure was close to the popular colloquial language, always rich in allegory, simile and metaphor.

Mayakovsky appreciated my interest in words; he considered me an expert on language and used to ask how they would put it at Kursk, where I came from.

Mayakovsky insisted on knowing not only the derivation of a word, but what it meant in actual usage.

All this, I think, was at the back of Mayakovsky's respectful, almost reverent attitude to V. V. Khlebnikov, who knew language, as they say, through and through, down to the finest shades of meaning. This also explained the complex sound experiments which were regarded by outsiders as self-indulgence and gibberish.

Mayakovsky regarded Khlebnikov as the unique master of a verbal music which did not fit into any framework of language scholarship, as if he were a kind of Lobachevsky of the word. But his mastery of the secrets of sound was also useful in practical application to the craft of poetry, since it opened up new possibilities for image-building.

Even as a young man, Mayakovsky had dreamed about creating a language of revolutionary poetry: "Silent, the street contorted in agony"; "Churlish make-up-men, krupps and kruppsies, paint on the city a grimace boarish, while in mouths lie words-decaying corpses". It was precisely about this that he reflected and made a number of statements since he was concerned with the gulf between the literary language and everyday colloquial speech, which was changing under the influence of the new events.

From the very beginning, however, Mayakovsky came up against the inertia of habituation to accepted, worn, used repetitions both in the literary language and in everyday speech as protected by its users. Some of these purists objected to the unconventionality of Mayakovsky's poetic diction and to its lack of resemblance to generally accepted phrase and sentence structure, regarding it as a perversion of the customary syntax, as the "ruin of language"; others simply refused to understand his poetics, pointing out the difficulty of understanding the new forms of expression which he had given to language.

Both parties usually referred to the authority of the classics, who had given us, they considered, eternal laws of expression, any deviation from which violated the correct use of the literary language.

Both parties forgot the "strange common parlance" bequeathed to us by Pushkin, which, as he defined it, in a "mature literature" changes with its current the stagnant forms of speech. Mayakovsky himself was a bearer of this "strange common parlance" which warped the tastes and habits of the custodians of literary tradition.

It must be said that the greatest poets of two different centuries were a long way ahead of the literary scholars and critics in laying down laws for the development of the literary language and its dependence on the spoken language, on the language of their own times.

Beginning with the chronicles, throughout the whole of our written literature there runs this living desire to renew literature, to inject into it the warm vitality of the times by using contemporary modes of expression born above all of the colloquial language as distinct from that of books. Hence Mayakovsky's slogan: "We seek a precise, stark diction", wholly in conformity with the charm of Pushkin's "stark

simplicity". Hence, too, his hatred of the false bourgeois worship of Pushkin, whom the philistines of that time respected only because he was a kammerjunker at the tsar's court and because he used to be paid "a gold piece per line". Pushkin the rebel, Pushkin the literary giant, was reduced by them for the most part to "divine bird" of the anthologies. Mayakovsky, who came nearer to Pushkin than any of the poets born after him in range of interests, in temperament, in giftedness, and in personal charm, could not help announcing this with the reverence of the great-grandson and with some irony at his own reverence.

Thus was clarified their relationship in the mind of the reader.

Mayakovsky was for me a human miracle, a miracle which, however, was tangible and visible every day of the week. At first, I simply marvelled, and then soon began to consider him a miracle I had newly discovered myself. Everything about him was pleasing and congenial to me: the majestic gait of the "slow and thoughtful pedestrian" who, having "deafened the world with the mighty thunder of his voice", goes about Moscow, surveying it like a conquering hero; the boyish grin or smile at the most unexpected moments; the sharp intake of breath when anyone talking to him displeased him in some way. But most important of all, I repeat, was the resemblance to a miracle, its everyday appearance as a normal phenomenon, like the rising of the moon or the noise of a railway train. He and I had a kind of tacit agreement; we shared the same convictions in a way. Perhaps this was because both of us came from a provincial background. Both of us had been street urchins in our childhood, knowing no bridle or restraint.

Mayakovsky, a leading personality of his time, had a great many friends and enemies. It is hard to say which were in the majority. His friends included his intimates and more distant acquaintances who applauded him at his public recitals, saw him off with a kindly glance and shouts of appreciation and then went away into the unknown, but would enter into bitter controversy at work or college with anyone who failed to acknowledge the "agitator, brazen-mouthed ringleader".

What Mayakovsky's friends had in common was enthusiasm: they enthused over his verse, his wit, over him as the image of the new

Soviet man. This enthusiasm was often shy and inarticulate, reluctant to declare itself. Such friends did not always have the gift for polemics or for entering into an argument; they dismissed with brief answers any onslaughts from those who hadn't yet "got through" to Mayakovsky and were offended at him because he was not instantly comprehensible. For those who knew Mayakovsky well, he became as familiar as a daily observed phenomenon. People become used to the good and the bad, if this good or bad comes repeatedly into the sphere of their long-term impressions.

Those who set eyes on the sea for the first time cannot adjust their vision to it straightaway. I remember my own personal impression of the Black Sea when I first saw it from the heights of the Baidary Gates. It seemed unreal, a wall rising vertically from the horizon and infinitely vast. That is how Mayakovsky struck those who met him for the first time—unusual, inexplicable, unlike anything they had ever seen before. This appealed to some and irritated others. But the unusual gradually became familiar; the feeling of astonishment subsided to some degree; the inexplicable was explained after the first time, the phenomenon was accepted and became part of everyday life. The sea became horizontal, like all seas: Mayakovsky became a human being, like all people. One sea was smaller, another bigger; but even the ocean can be calm and quiet until it lifts its towering billows.

Mayakovsky was an ocean among seas, a man of tremendous gifts; but people grow accustomed to anything, and Mayakovsky became a convenient target not merely for the tax inspector, the critic, the philistine, and the poetry-lover. But he became familiar to his intimates. Enthusiasm, delight, love for his verse, for his public readings, for the vast range of his interests and behaviour, gradually subsided to be replaced by a long-term feeling of good will and the conviction that one was living near an ocean.

So it was with his friends. But with those of a hostile disposition, the situation was more complicated. They were not all actively hostile to the same degree. Those who did not accept Mayakovsky were of many kinds. First, there were those who had been offended by him on some literary or philistine issue, and these usually had in common a dislike of everything new, difficult to understand, or disturbingly out-of-the-ordinary. And in the heat of an argument Mayakovsky often insulted very vindictive people with a morbidly developed vanity.

Before the Revolution, I remember, when he was appearing in the notorious yellow blouse, a respectable white-haired lady in the first row tried to hit Mayakovsky with the stopper from a carafe on the stage. He had upset her so much with his flouting of convention that

she forgot her own respectability and became involved in a brawl with a Futurist who, still arguing with his audience, merely kept bending sideways to dodge the hand armed with the glass stopper. I know that even this woman's children preserved the family tradition founded by their parent, continuing to nourish, if not hatred, then at least dislike in memory of this battle.

He offended so many people with his unguarded use of language in controversy! Not to mention his naming of names, as was frequent not only in his verse, but in verbal encounters, when his enemies often went away with their ambitions sorely bruised. It was all right if they were enemies on matters of principle who did not share his views on art but acknowledged his right to hold such views. Among them I include those who disagreed with Mayakovsky on equal terms without taking advantage of their position — Lunacharsky, for instance. But such foes were few.

The majority of Mayakovsky's detractors and repudiators were not motivated by differences of literary standpoint, but by ambition: they could not tolerate the least disrespect for their authority.

One literary pundit, who had been offended by Mayakovsky, had his portrait taken down in the establishment of which he was head. He could not bear the sight of the poet who had insulted him. Another no less eminent literary bigwig could not hear Mayakovsky's name mentioned without gloomily remarking that he might be talented, but he was such a rough character!

Mayakovsky made many enemies as a result of referring to people by name in his poems, beginning with Kogan and Steklov and ending with Alexei Tolstoy. All these were distinguished adversaries; but there were so many who were unseen and unheard owing to a reluctance to speak out, embittered philistines stung by the thunder of his voice, delayed at the conference, lying late in bed, lying under cover, Prishibeyevs who had changed their official uniform for a tunic, Chichikovs and Podkolesins who wanted nothing new, nothing that could upset their set tastes, convictions, and habits. They are thought to have vanished from the scene today. But they haven't really. In any storm, the wind blows up a great deal of dust and filth. As the Revolution swept the vast lower strata of the people on their way up to the top, it also took with it much surface dust of the past. Lighter and more buoyant, this dust often blinded the eyes, making it impossible to distinguish true inspiration from pomposity, from opportunism, from falsehood masked by good intentions, by the avowed desire to safeguard the classical heritage from Mayakovsky's evil designs, as if he wanted to obliterate everything that was valuable in the past.

This was exploited by those who contrasted Mayakovsky with the past as a whole, with all its sacrosanct, tottering mainstays and traditions. It was swooped on by people who genuinely feared a loss of cultural values, a snapping of links with the traditions of the past. This apprehension and distrust of Mayakovsky's right to make innovations in poetry, drama, taste, and views on art, survived long after his personal talent and his right to speak as a representative of Soviet society had become indisputable.

It is evidently not enough for a great poet merely to be a poet. Pushkin regretted that the Decembrists, though they learned his poems by heart, did not include him in their plans; the author of *The Divine Comedy* peopled Hell with his own political enemies; Lord Byron helped the Greek insurgents in their struggle against the Turks.

It was the same with Mayakovsky: being merely a poet didn't satisfy him. He set out on the road of agitation, the road of political oratory for which he was naturally suited. First, a youth in a velvet non-Russian blouse, a poet with a penchant for Left art, writing verse clearly inspired by French painting—and even with references to its chief exponents:

*The automobile rouged the lips  
of a pallid woman by Carrière.*

We might also recall that this youth, who had begun thinking about revolution, was also in prison, with his photograph on the police records *en face* and in profile.

Several times, I attempted the difficult task of counting up Mayakovsky's metaphors. No sooner had I begun, than I gave up, since I was convinced that this could only end with my copying out nearly every line he wrote.

Which is the best of them all? Isn't it the one in which Mayakovsky says that by leaning on one's ribs, one may jump out of one's own heart?

I came across this metaphor as a young man when reading *Cloud in Pants*. I hadn't yet really worked out what poetry was. Of course, I had already met the galloping monument, and the tsar feasting in Petersburg town, and the star which flares up with another star. My joyful understanding of all this, however, was hindered by the fact that comprehension did not come freely and of its own accord, but was accompanied by a sense of obligation, since these lines were "taught" at school, and familiarity with them was like a familiarity with, say, mathematics or jurisprudence. Their beauty consequently became tarnished. But now, suddenly, the discovery of poetry, and all of my own free will as it were.... So that's what poetry is! "I'll jump out," cries the poet, "I'll jump out, I'll jump out!"

He wants to jump out of his own heart. He pushes against his own ribs and tries to jump out of himself!

Strange, but at that moment I had visions of a city: cycle-tracks, the arcs of bridges—perhaps indeed at that moment my eye was caught by something grandiose and urban.... Be that as it may, this man, crawling out of himself through a spiral of ribs, towered in my consciousness like something enormous, blotting out the sunset.... And so later, whenever I met Mayakovsky in the flesh, he always seemed

something else to me: not just a man, but the city, or the sunset flaming over it.

It is amazing how this poet, who began as a Futurist and who wrote mainly for the few, began, after the October Revolution, to rush so passionately towards the masses, towards the general reading public. He was almost constantly on tour in the provinces, speaking in towns and cities all over the country, at factories, in universities, in military units. He could not live without this contact with the public: it delighted him, inspired him, and kept him young.

"Something new—that's what I'm going to read them now; something new!" I remember him saying as he paced up and down in the wings at the Polytechnical Museum in Moscow, which was packed to capacity with restless young people. "Students! I must read something new! I'm nervous!"

And, rolling up his shirt-sleeves—many have recalled this rolling up of the sleeves: it was unforgettable—and, rolling up his sleeves, as if getting down to work, his jacket off and in his "freshly laundered shirt", he went to make his entrance!

He was magnificent on stage. Apart from the remarkable poems and his remarkable delivery, his handling of the public was in itself enthralling. The dazzling wittiness of his come-backs at this or that sally from the auditorium, the impromptu asides that would evoke a storm of applause, the powerful utterances about poetry that reduced the auditorium to a hush—all this was unique, inimitable, impressive in the highest degree, and compelled one to marvel at the talent, intellect, and temperament of the man.

Mayakovsky was a tall or, to be more precise, a big man, because he was not asthenic, like most tall people, but was also heavily built. He had a large head which matched his huge frame, a firm nose, also big, which often whistled with a cold—Mayakovsky used to say that, as a southerner, he was prone to colds in Moscow—and a jutting chin.

His eyes were indescribable: big and black, with a stare which, whenever we met him, seemed to be the only thing in the world at that particular moment. As if there was nothing else round us and only that stare existed.

When I remember Mayakovsky, I immediately see those eyes of his—even through wallpaper or dense foliage. They are looking at me, and I have the impression that the world is becoming hushed and mysterious. What sort of gaze is this? It is the gaze of genius.

He was the king of metaphor. He and another poet, the late Iosif Utkin, were once playing billiards. One of them struck, and something happened to the balls as a result of which they bounded up with a clatter.

"Horses of fortune," I said.



"Blind horses of fortune," corrected Mayakovsky, leaning on his cue.

Among the thousands of metaphors he created, there was one which particularly impressed me. Talking about the power of words, he said that to the power which is "applauded by the boxes" he preferred the power as a result of which "coffins tear up and walk away upon their wooden legs". Only Dante could have said that.

What is a great artist? A man whose ceiling is higher than heaven.

Nature created for Mayakovsky the finest furniture in the world — a chandelier of stars, soaring mountains, changing clouds, the tumultuous Georgian mountain torrent.

A mountain cannot be exchanged for hills, and a torrent cannot be bottled.

Mayakovsky is the most spacious room in the world, and he is a room without walls. It will be said: but a man cannot live without walls—they give shelter, and they are hung with the portraits of the great and with the photographs of dead friends and relatives.

Then, long live walls which do not isolate us from the world. Walls that shut out the world are a prison.

Mayakovsky, to me, is a wall that links me with the whole world.

I look at the photograph: a twelve-year-old boy, a third-former at Kutaisi High School. It has been reproduced from a group portrait—father, mother, sisters. A common-place photograph, it would seem, of the kind you find in any family album.

But this was back in 1905. Shooting had already been heard, and revolutionary songs, and shouts of "Down with!"—in Georgian and in Russian.

And ahead—the tempestuous year of 1917.

A storm cannot write its autobiography. It needs thunder-showers, not ink; not exclamation marks, but no punctuation at all!

Some poets' verses about October are calligraphy. But Mayakovsky's poetry is "stormography".

Lermontov has a line:

*But he, rebellious, seeks a tempest....*

Mayakovsky never sought any tempest. The tempest sought him. And he justified the great trust of the revolutionary tempest.

Literary scholars, the authors of monographs, divide Mayakovsky into the early and the later. I don't know about this myself: for me, Mayakovsky was never either early or late.

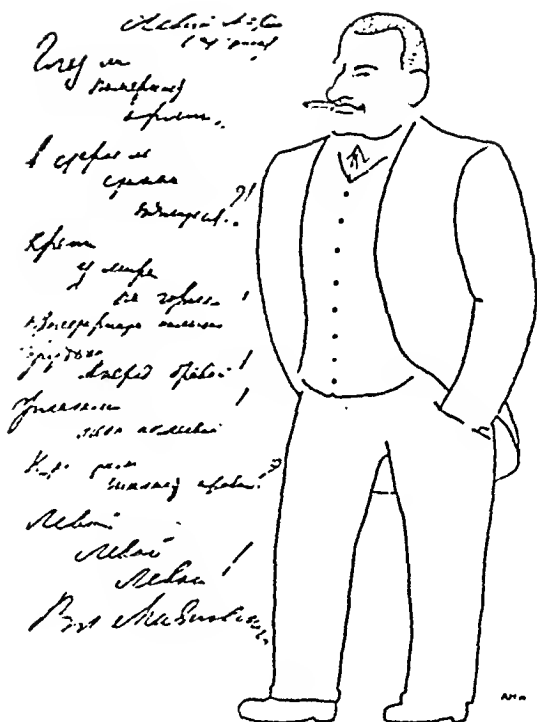
I look at the photograph of the twelve-year-old boy who has already lived a third of his life. And I think of my own sixty years—which are well over a third of mine.

When my reader says to me: "Tell me about yourself," I answer: "I'd better tell about him."

I seem to remember from Vassily Kamensky's book how Mayakovsky, already an adult, went back home to Georgia. He looked in on his native

A teacher, according to the vulgar established tradition, is a man who must be imitated. I don't hold with this. In art, a teacher is a man who has helped you to become yourself.

Mayakovsky  
Drawing by Czech  
artist Ad. Hof-  
meister, 1927.



Vladimír Majakovskij

Kutaisi, visited Tbilisi, read poetry, enjoyed himself, and several times even tried to dance the *lezghinka*. He climbed with a big party up Mount David, and, surveying the mountains from up there, said:

"Now there's an auditorium for you! From the stage of this mountain you could speak to the whole world. You could say something like this: 'they've decided to change you, old man'."

This was in 1914—three years before the time when they were to begin changing the old world.

I wanted to talk about Mayakovsky's childhood

By lyrical poetry, many mean the rhymed statement of feelings. In the final analysis, such a skill is not

hard to achieve. All that's needed is the ability to imitate well. And in art you can imitate anything you like, except temperament. That is why all Mayakovsky's imitators have not left a trace behind.

years in the Georgian village of Baghdadi, which now bears his name, and about Kutaisi High School, and about what the year 1905 meant to the future great poet of the Revolution.

And I must announce with regret that I have failed to cope with this task. Perhaps others who continue "Mayakovsky's journey" will prove more lucky and successful than I.

The only thing I have hanging on the wall at home is a portrait of Mayakovsky. And so I feel as if my room had no walls.

...Mayakovsky has been translated—fully or partly—into the languages of all the peoples in the USSR. Separate works of his have been translated into over twenty-five languages of Europe, America, and Asia.

Mayakovsky's poetry had, and still has, a powerful impact on the development of all Soviet poetry. His influence may be found in the work of many revolutionary writers abroad.

Typical of Mayakovsky, as of no poet before him, was a sense of the new, a feeling for the times. He was the only one amongst the writers and poets whose pen kept up with the pace and with all the changes of the Revolution. Reading through volume after volume of his collected works, you seem to go through all its stages: October, the Civil War, the New Economic Policy, the First Five-Year Plan. And even what he did not live to see himself lives in his verse as a kind of rare foresight, prescience or simply aspiration. He hardly missed a single important political phenomenon or event, he recorded hundreds of dates, he indicated the most important and the most trivial changes in daily life, and he disclosed much that was ugly about it.

In spite of his unconventional—from the viewpoint of the old poetic standards—manner, and sometimes excessive, as it seems at first, use of metaphors and symbolic human images, Mayakovsky wrote with outstanding accuracy and detail. Many objects, phenomena, and designations, which were once characteristic features of our daily life, now live in our memory solely because they were recorded by Mayakovsky. This is particularly so where the Moscow city scene is concerned....

...The chief characteristic of Mayakovsky's poetry is a complete fusion of the social and the personal. He approached everything—people, things, events—personally, deeply, eagerly, with love or hatred, with passion or irony, with humour or sarcasm. The theme of love occupied an enormous place in his work. But, as invariably with all the world's great poets, it grew into a universally human theme or, in any case, was linked with the great social problems of life and existence. This tremendous man, whom all remember as a fierce fighter, was rather modest and easily hurt.

It is possible to find in the thunder of his poetry such tender words and emotions that, for all his originality, they give him something in common with the Russian classical poets. But this tenderness only sometimes half emerges in Mayakovsky's verse and then immediately takes refuge behind irony or suddenly rises to passion.

Mayakovsky accomplished a true revolution in Russian verse, dislocating the established rhythms, enriching the poetic vocabulary with the folklore and parlance of the urban masses, with word forms evoked by the Revolution. Thanks to this dislocation, for Mayakovsky



Mayakovsky among delegates of the RAPP conference at the exhibition *Twenty Years of Work* (1930).

words no longer existed which could not be put into verse according to the conditions of rhythm or verbal pronunciation. He broke with the distinction between "lofty" and "low" in the use of words. For him, everything was equally worthy of poetic attention:

Sure,  
"Capitalism" rings not so very elegant;  
"Nightingale" has a far more delicate sound.  
Yet I'll go back to it whenever relevant.  
Let stanzas like fighting slogans resound!  
... "Proletariat" seems  
to those too clumsy for using



Everything was unusual about the phenomenon known as VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY. He was, as it were, specially created for the epoch of the great breakthrough in human relations, for the epoch of the October Socialist Revolution. We shall not find throughout the whole of world literary history such a combination of infinite creative energy, revolutionary passion, unique talent, lofty ideals, social purposefulness, spirit of invention and burning patriotism, hatred for the foes of the Revolution and all the forces of the past, international scope, lyricism, fervour, satire and tragedy.

He was an original, and not least by virtue of his unique verse structure, the variety of which enabled him, thanks to his tremendous talent, to rise to the heights of a new kind of epic in his wonderful long poems, and to descend to writing captions for posters or to blend lyricism with harsh satire. We shall not find anyone as natural and as amazing anywhere in world literature. He was the spokesman for a class which he extolled with loyalty and devotion.

He rejected the poetic styles of the past, refusing to appear in the guise of the inspired bard, the grandiloquent rhetorician, the cryptic oracle, or "twittering like a quail". Before the audience would appear a giant of a man who would take off his jacket and drape it over the back of a chair as if he were a skilled craftsman in a special workshop and was just getting down to a job of work. And he would set about it, full of inspired frenzy and cheerful inspiration, self-confident, always game for an argument, astounding his hearers with thunder of his voice; and there was no one who could answer him in such lofty, rich, and amazing verse or with such a clear sense of purpose. If he took the offensive, his poetry was like a lash whistling through the air; if he praised the achievements of the Revolution or spoke about real, great feelings, the sincerity and conviction of his lines got through to the most unsophisticated listener.

Moreover, he saw "coming over the mountains of time, that which nobody else has seen". He saw the future. And so he towered head and shoulders over the majority, and his voice was meant for the city square, the street, and the workshop.

"Mobilised and enlisted by the October call-up", he gave all his creative powers to the great cause of building Communism.

As distinct from all preceding 20th-century poets, Mayakovsky introduced into poetry his own era in all its scope and with all the complexity of its political and day-to-day phenomena, and he did so with an imagery and honesty which achieved the greatest possible impact. The man of his time, the citizen and the poet were as one in works of the most varied content. Mayakovsky did not ignore the achievements of classical poetry, but he discovered new horizons. Believing in the future with all his heart, he knew that his verse would



Mayakovsky on  
Wall Street  
(1925).



"burst through the bulk of the years" and would live for remote posterity, because he had found a unique embodiment of words, rhythms, and rhymes which time could never shake.

The voice of Vladimir Mayakovsky, tribune and agitator, reverberated on every continent. Today, from the four corners of the Earth we can hear tributes to the world's recognition of Mayakovsky and how, as a colossal historic phenomenon, he has long influenced the ideological and aesthetic views of talented revolutionary poets everywhere.

We see that the work of such poets as Nazim Hikmet, Becher, Vaptsarov, Broniewski, Neumann and Neruda is very close to that of

Mayakovsky. Christo Radevsky writes: "It is doubtful whether the world has known a more or less developed progressive and revolutionary poetry in which the powerful influence of Mayakovsky does not make itself felt."

Mayakovsky has been translated into many of the world's languages. The American critic Leonard Ballen, in a review of Mayakovsky's poems, once wrote that this first comprehensive anthology of the Soviet Union's most popular poet, which had been published in England, was of particular interest to the American reading public because they knew of no such phenomenon as a poet who was virtually a favourite of the people.

During the Second World War, the Australian writer Katharine Susannah Prichard wrote that with the songs and poems of Mayakovsky in their thoughts, the peoples of the Soviet Union went to fight against Hitlerism and fascist barbarism. Can there be a better memorial to a poet than the fact that his works always inspire the peoples of the world to defend the great ideals of human culture and progress?

The influence of Mayakovsky's work grows with every new revolutionary upsurge of the peoples who are struggling for their freedom and independence, and with the development and strengthening of their national poetry.

It couldn't have been otherwise. Mayakovsky was in love with the proletarian Revolution: he lived wholly by its interests and couldn't breathe freely except in its pure air. His passionate conviction in the rightness of our common cause, multiplied by his powerful and rare talent as a poet, immortalised the name of this singer of the Revolution.

His whole poetic vocabulary and all his new and hitherto unprecedented verse techniques were engendered by the expectation of the October Revolution, its victory, and its glorious destiny. Kalinin once said that Mayakovsky's verse form alone tells us that this was a poet of the Revolution.

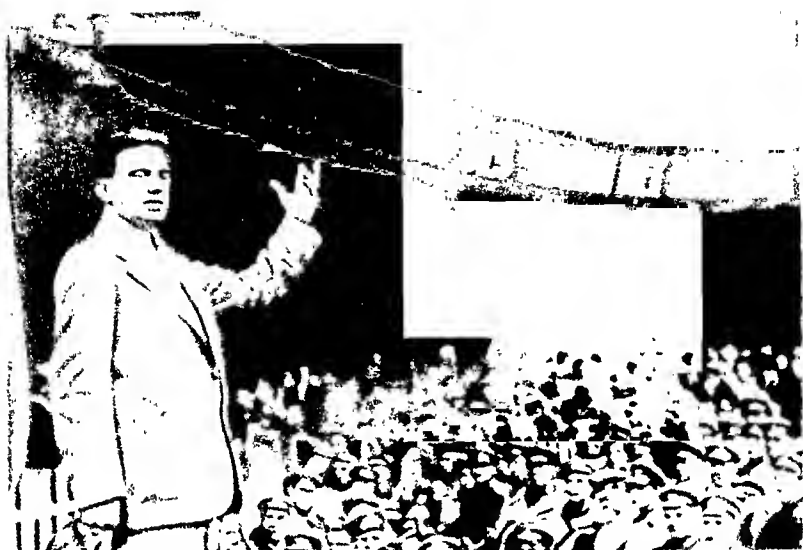
Many of Mayakovsky's deliberately polemical utterances gave his enemies grounds to declare that he treated the Russian classics with nihilistic contempt. This is not true! Read his poetry more carefully, and you will see, behind the polemical barbs and the hail-fellow-well-met manner, a respectful and affectionate attitude to Pushkin, Lermontov and Nekrasov, and to his contemporaries Blok and Yesenin.

As Mayakovsky told us himself, he knew the whole of *Yevgeni Onegin* by heart. He truly loved Lermontov and Gogol, and he regarded Nekrasov as his immediate predecessor. Re-read the poem dedicated to Sergei Yesenin: in our literature, which reacted widely to Yesenin's death, there is no other poem on this subject of such depth and power.

The great achievement of Vladimir Mayakovsky's life was that, together with Demyan Bedny, he rescued poetry from the world of stuffy *salons* and elegantly bound books and took it to the concert-hall stage, the factory workshop, the city square. Newspapers, posters, the cinema and the radio were his favourite platforms. And poetry did not decline or perish because of this, but drew fresh strength from life itself. He wanted to talk, not to a few dozen pseudo-literary dilettanti, but to his own working class, to the whole people.

The more important and the more profound the artist, the more powerful is his urge to speak openly to the people. This openness, as a rule, comes to light in the form of a diary or "confession". Moreover, in eras turbulent with popular uprisings, in eras of growing revolutions, the traditionally calm form of the "confession" is replaced by one which is explosive, daring, agitational, and anti-traditional, or even it disintegrates completely. We find the explosive, and to some extent cryptic, form of "confession" in Alexander Radishchev who, with the sharp blade of his righteous word, struck out at the tsars and the gentry as early as the end of the 18th century. In his *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow*, and also in his ode *Freedom*, when speaking of the people he was also speaking of himself as herald of the "shining day" of freedom.

It came as a shock to many when, at the beginning of the 20th century, Mayakovsky spoke out in a bold form of "confession". And it was a terrifying shock—terrifying for the bankers, the tsars and the priests; terrifying for the bankrupt heads of a decaying Europe. I am not speaking here of the autobiographical element, but of the artist's extreme need always to be ready to render account to the people. And so it is not by accident that I have compared Mayakovsky with Radishchev—they indeed had a great deal in common: the constant intensity and keen vision of the prophet; the habit of always advancing along the straight roads of life; along the highways of history; the ability to see the future through the mist of centuries; and the sense of hearing—so acute that it accurately detected the footsteps of the future and, finally, the voice of the orator, which struck a particularly sublime note when it had to be heard by the people.



Mayakovsky speaking to Red Armymen (1929).

It is impossible to imagine the historical development, not only of Russian Soviet literature, but of the literatures of other fraternal peoples in the Soviet Union, without Mayakovsky and the decisive influence of his poetry on them. It is enough merely to approach historically each of the fraternal literatures of the Soviet Union and trace its growth in order to see that Mayakovsky stood at the cradle of our multinational Soviet poetry, and that it has owed much, and still does, to what was learned from him. I think that in living and ceaseless communion with his work, our poetry will also solve in the future the tasks dictated by our progress towards Communism.

It is natural that, in the historic years of the great revolutionary upheaval, an inspired and innovatory poetry should have made itself heard, and in the Russian language above all. Mayakovsky was the first to hear the poetic challenge of our epoch and the first to respond to it. For this, the Revolution honoured him with the title of its first poet.

Pushkin was the dawn of our consciousness. It was through his poetry that we, the non-Russian nationalities, came to know the spiritual world of the great Russian people. I remember how, when I was still at school, my comrades and I were impressed for the first time by the freshness and lofty simplicity of Pushkin's poem "In the rosy dawn..." (we subsequently learned that this was an excerpt from his poem *The Cherry Tree*). Pushkin awakened our consciousness with warm, affectionate, simple words, as a mother awakens her children in the morning. That is what Pushkin's poetry meant to us. We know that a number of talented poets in subsequent decades bore the banner of Russian poetry with honour and without staining its Pushkin-like purity. We know that Nekrasov, the "mourner of the people's grief", gave poetry lofty social overtones. But we also know that decadence, thriving on the defeat of the 1905 Revolution, temporarily stifled Russian poetry. Poets of various schools and coteries, from Merezhkovsky the mystic to Severyanin the egofuturist, began to shun the living Russian word, to mangle it, to violate it, to invent words as hieroglyphs and words as ornaments.... They regarded the poetry of Pushkin, Lermontov and Nekrasov as banal. For them, words were not a means of expressing thought, but a means of concealing it. The embryonic revolutionary poetry of this period was still very weak. This is the "household" to which Mayakovsky came. He had to shift the lumber from the poetic arsenal, drag words out of the slime of decadence, give them back their original Pushkin-like precision and resonance.

But does this mean that he came like a fairy prince to the sleepy kingdom of poetry and revived it with a wave of his hand? No. Here we must remember that there were several stages in the incredibly difficult struggle for the new poetic diction. Mayakovsky did not arrive with a ready-made, worked out codex of revolutionary poetry. He began by countering the refined, aesthetic style of the poetry of that time with words "as simple as a bellowing", with words of the "tongueless" street which had "nothing to shout and speak with". And the nearer he drew to the Revolution, the more powerful and self-confident he became in his struggle for the new poetry.

He came to the Revolution not only with a consciousness of his place in the workers' ranks, but with the mature vocabulary and syntax of a poet and revolutionary. And he did not merely restore to words their Pushkin-like purity and power; words in his poetry acquired a special

effectiveness. They invaded life, influenced the destinies of men and women, and took a vigorously active part in the affairs of the Soviet state.

If we cannot imagine Russian poetry without Pushkin, we cannot think of Soviet poetry without Mayakovsky either.

Words in Mayakovsky's writings acquired a force of the most effective kind. Words of action—this is the formula that is needed if we are to determine the significance of words in Mayakovsky. Consequently, his singling out of words into separate lines was not a formal, but a meaningful, I would even say an ideological, factor. In translation, these words preserve their force, however, only when their arrangement into stanzas coincides closely with the original. To achieve such coincidences, it is necessary to find in translation a rhythmic structure adequate to the original. And it is here that the translators begin to diverge. One bases his translation on the metre of the original. But this rhythm is unusual for Tatar syllabo-accentual verse and the reader has difficulty in accepting it. Form should not interfere with acceptability: on the contrary, it should facilitate it. What is to be done? Another translator dispenses with the free cadences of the original and uses the 19-syllable metre typical of contemporary Tatar prosody. The translation is acceptable to the reader, but the form diverges from the original. Furthermore, this form seriously inhibits the translator.

How, then, did we go about translating Mayakovsky into Tatar? We began with the consistent use of the Tatar 19-syllable line, and only then did we reconstruct in translation the poetic rhythms of the original.

Mayakovsky was a fearless writer. He was not afraid of difficult subjects; on the contrary, he sought for them until he found them and did not let go of them until he had disclosed their essence and exhausted them poetically. But this was not the sole purpose of Mayakovsky's searchings. He looked for what was most important and fundamental in the life of society and the Soviet state, and he responded to it through his poetry. He was a poet on the grand scale who created monumental works such as *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*, *Fine!*, and others. At the same time, the minutest details of life and existence did not escape his notice. He was a master at finding the connection between the important and the trivial, the general and the particular, the abstract and the concrete. I try to learn all this from Mayakovsky. It is difficult for me to judge whether I have achieved anything in this respect, but if I have, then I still don't know in which of my works. But I immediately catch myself out where, doubtless as a result of insufficient poetic inspiration or experience, I depart and diverge from Mayakovsky.



I have quite often failed to link the general and the particular, the abstract and the concrete. I have sometimes confused the concept of the particular with the concept of what is strictly personal and insignificant in terms of life. On such occasions, I have lost my natural ear for music and have sung out of tune in a voice not really mine. But there is always the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky on whose voice one may tune one's own.

We must learn more seriously and more deeply from Mayakovsky; we must follow him not slavishly, but creatively.

As you read and re-read Mayakovsky's poems, you find in them an echo of your own feelings at any moment of life. There is not a single contemporary phenomenon, not one exciting theme, not one problem of life, which escaped Mayakovsky's attention.

He was the first to affirm in the whole of his work the popular character of Soviet poetry, its Party approach, its ideological sense of purpose. His personal "I" and his lyricism are firmly bound up with the feelings of Soviet man and woman, and in this sense of social commitment lies the secret of his immortality as a creative artist. The inseverable link between poetry and life and the active nature of that link are what matter most and are most valuable in the heritage of this great poet, in his tradition in the widest sense of the word. Mayakovsky's example confirms that art is only vital when it is firmly tied up with the people and the Party.

His art as a poet was motivated by an organic feeling of resistance to the pre-revolutionary way of life, by the desire to talk to the people, by the craving for the new which was characteristic of him all his life. Even when he was under the influence of Futurism, he still towered head and shoulders above it, because his protest against the old form of poetry came above all from his protest against the old form of life. It is no accident that Mayakovsky wrote his first poems in Butyrskaya prison, where he was sent for taking part in the release of political prisoners.

The works written by Mayakovsky before the Revolution, such as the tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovsky* and the poems *Cloud in Pants*, *War and Peace*, and *Man*, are above all a denunciation of the capitalist world. Mayakovsky crushed to death the decadence of countless schools and coteries, stressed in all his work the undying greatness of Pushkin and Nekrasov, and added to these models a fiery colloquial verse born of the Revolution, the verse of Mayakovsky. Pushkin, Nekrasov and Mayakovsky are in the same line of ideological and realistic Russian poetry; no one will disagree about these great names, and no one will ever be able to set them off against one another on the grounds of purely formal and external differences.

Pushkin, Nekrasov and Mayakovsky created models of service to the people; they were close to one another, because:

*And long the people yet will honour me  
Because my lyre was tuned to loving-kindness  
And, in a cruel Age, I sang of Liberty....<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Irina Zheleznova.—Ed.



War. Furthermore, working on newspapers, tirelessly struggling with all the manifestations of philistinism, bureaucracy and other leftovers of capitalism, Mayakovsky constantly reiterated the same theme—the bright future of the Soviet state....

There is great significance in the fortunate circumstance that Mayakovsky, a poet of the highest poetic gifts, a profound student of human nature, a politician, a revolutionary and an innovator, should have initiated our Soviet poetry, should have become its leader, and should still be its guiding light.

His leading role in poetry became clear to progressive men of letters from the very first days of Soviet power, from the very first steps of his mature work. During the difficult struggle for socialist realism, to give poetry a national character and while affirming his main strength, which for all of us is the main tradition of Mayakovsky—a Party approach to art—Mayakovsky met with considerable opposition. We could not ignore this without depriving him of his great achievement in consistency, in force of convictions, in heroic and titanic labours dedicated to defending the principles which have become integral to our Soviet poetry.

Mayakovsky's influence on the poetry of those years consisted not only in his poetic activity, but in the battle which he fought by means of verse and the militant word all his life. Mayakovsky's example, from the very inception of our poetry, supported and inspired the best Soviet poets. His friendly censure, friendly praise, and, most important of all, the example of daily participation with the help of verse in the struggle of the people, were bound to make themselves felt on the formation of our poetry, even though the poets working with Mayakovsky at that time were very different, and even though their own attitudes to his poetry varied. Some of them became poets in the crucible of the Revolution, others found their message during the Civil War, and others had only just begun singing Komsomol songs; but each brought his own voice to poetry, his own youthful romanticism, his own faith in the future.

Mayakovsky loved Soviet poetry, kept a zealous eye on it, was proud of it, spoke of it in his appearances before the reading public at home and abroad. All remember, for example, Mayakovsky's appearance in 1927 in Czechoslovakia entitled "Ten Years of Ten Russian Poets", which greatly enhanced the prestige of Soviet poetry.

It is perfectly obvious that Mayakovsky, in creating a revolutionary type of poetry and in selflessly struggling for the Party approach in literature, never set himself the formalist aim of destroying classical verse, never set his poetry up against the classics, and did not regard it as the only kind possible or as unchallengeable. Consequently, the foundation of Mayakovsky's traditions consisted above all in his

aesthetic views on the relationship between poetry and life, and it was these traditions that had the most incontrovertible and beneficial effect on Soviet poets....

Soviet poetry was always with the people. The work of our major contemporary poets of various generations, poetic styles and dictions, is indissolubly bound up with the life and the struggle of our people. In this lies the quintessence of our poetry, and in this the fundamental traditions established by Vladimir Mayakovsky still live. It is when we let our ties with life weaken and when we begin failing to conform with the profundities of life, it is when we fall silent, to evade the problems of the time and the phenomena of reality, it is when we stray from the vital interests and aspirations of man—it is then that we let Mayakovsky down and undermine the struggle for the mastery of his traditions.

Reading and re-reading Mayakovsky's lyrics and poems, you see how responsive and sensitive he was and how much love there was in his nature. After all, that tradition of his—the indivisible fusion of the personal and the social, and the Party approach in his poetry, which we take as our model—is not only his creative manner, but his way of life. Consequently, the unity of the personal and the social also became his aesthetic credo, and to this unity Mayakovsky was true to the end. In the poem *It*, and especially in *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* and *Fine!*, this inner unity of his found its brilliant embodiment—in the highly creative merits of these works, just as in *My Soviet Passport*, the travel poems, the satire, and the lyrics. Mayakovsky was always conscious of artistic truth and his responsibility to the people. He had a wide range of interests; it is impossible to enumerate all the subjects he raised.

Mayakovsky was always aware of the educative significance of his poetry and always defended everything bright, confident, and vital....

...We know that Mayakovsky took for his subjects the most urgent problems of Soviet life and the deepest feelings of Soviet people. All of us taken together could hardly encompass the themes by which he lived—so vast was his creative and human palette. But Mayakovsky's main subject and most important task—the one to which he devoted all his art and to which he subordinated all other themes—was to create the image of Soviet man.

Mayakovsky's poetry was sustained by the highest demands of social communication; it came from his aspiration to make man better, more inspired, more subtle, more abundant in love. His poetry lived to pass on to man the special something that had been revealed to him, to delight man with the vision of the highest communist aim, to inspire him with the thought and feeling with which Soviet life made Mayakovsky himself so happy.

Nothing new comes easily. Translating Mayakovsky into the languages of the peoples of Daghestan presents a double difficulty. Mayakovsky's rhythms cannot be squeezed into the old syllabic metre. It is incredibly difficult to express, through the singing structure of Avar poetry, the originality of Mayakovsky's poetry—a poetry so markedly different from that of the Russian poets who preceded him. It is pointless to render Mayakovsky into the very rhythms which he himself deliberately broke up. Mayakovsky's innovatory verse inspires the translator to innovation in his own national poetic forms. Naturally, I don't mean the mechanical transplanting of Mayakovsky's poetics on to the soil of another people's poetry. To translate Mayakovsky means, for the poet, to rise to a new level; it means that he must discover a new continent in his own poetry; he must take a gigantic step forward. To translate Mayakovsky means to enrich one's native language with new words, new combinations of words, new sayings.

Mayakovsky cannot, of course, be translated from literal versions. To do justice to Mayakovsky, one must know the Russian language so as to penetrate into the meaning of every Russian phrase, turn of speech, and cadence. But that is not all. One must know the history of Russian poetry well. Mayakovsky was an innovator. To translate him, one needs to know which Russian poetic traditions he was developing further, which ones he was rejecting, with whom and how he battled in defence of his literary principles. To translate Mayakovsky means to renounce everything in poetry that is old and obsolete, and to struggle for what is new and alive. Translating Mayakovsky is a difficult and honourable task. It is not surprising that Mayakovsky has been translated by the world's finest poets into their own languages.

It would be very wrong to reduce, as some poets have done, the difficulties of translating Mayakovsky to those of reproducing his verse form. They forget that Mayakovsky created a new form to embody the content of the Soviet era. And the main difficulties for the Mayakovsky translator lie in conveying the new content of his poetry, in disclosing the poet's personality, in disclosing all the multiformity of his sad, wrathful, forceful, optimistic cadences, and of his vigorous Party standpoint.

The poetry of Mayakovsky rears up like a towering wave in the great and stormy ocean of revolutionary battles for the future of mankind, for Communism. His name is heard above all among the revolutionary Russian people, who engendered him as man and poet. But Mayakovsky is no less precious and dear to the hearts of all other peoples. He came to some later than to others. But once he arrived, he stayed for all time and became accepted by them as one of their own.

We know many fine poets in the world. Why, then, does his voice stand out so unmistakably from the general chorus? Is it not because his was the challenge of the new man and the new world?

With self-sacrificing devotion, Vladimir Mayakovsky served the Revolution, the Party, mankind, and poetry, and he gave of himself without reserve. After all, his love for mankind involved him in the revolutionary struggle and took him into the cells of the tsarist prisons. Early in life, he was caught up in the problem of the liberation of man, and this helped him to get away from purely formal experimentation, from the glitter of stage success. This young poet with the striking intuition, thanks to the great humanist traditions of Russian literature, arrived at the basic theme of truly great art—the destiny of mankind. Observing the world around him and analysing himself and his ties with life, he came to agonising and staggering conclusions about the machinery of bourgeois civilisation. These conclusions are recorded in three poems of exceptional power written during his early period: *Cloud in Pants*, *War and Peace*, and *Man*. Their chief character is Man himself.

Who is he, this Man?

Mayakovsky knew that the destruction and eradication of the old world's soulless egoism could only be accomplished by a proletarian revolution, which alone could elevate man and "straighten him out". And so Mayakovsky devoted himself to the Revolution, dreaming with all his heart of the man of the future in whom he had such faith.

In the day-to-day reality of the Soviet state, the poet saw the inspired beauty of toil, of creation, of construction. The voice of the poet was now joyful, full of optimism, as invigorating as the air of spring. "The revolution is mine", "this house is mine," argues foundryman Ivan Kozyrev as he moves into a new flat, a symbol of the renewed life of people. And against the dark background of the difficulties and shortcomings of those years, we see shining, like a beam of light in Rembrandt, the simple, sensitive, joyous words of the poet which have become a byword all over our country:

*Life*  
*is good,*  
*And it's good*  
*to be alive.*

Particularly dear to us now are the passionate social commitment of Mayakovsky's poetry, his life-affirming joy and fervour, his glorification of revolutionary activity.

His work — with its revolutionary message and its labour heroism, its satire and its humour — was solely devoted to a single aim. In helping man towards self-regeneration, the poet too is regenerated.

During the process of struggle and toil, great changes also took place in the spiritual make-up of man. The seeds of egoism have begun to disappear and the shoots of Communism have been breaking through — collective feeling, self-sacrifice, love for communal labour, and friendship.

Only a poet of Promethean stature could have created a poem like *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*. It is the culmination of Mayakovsky's work; it is the epic of the people who engendered it, raised a leader, struggled alongside him and finally won through to victory. And so the poem rings out like *The Internationale* that burst from the hearts of millions, like Beethoven's inspired Ninth Symphony.

The poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* is a synthesis of all Mayakovsky's revolutionary message and revolutionary humanism, and it is also his greatest triumph.

Mayakovsky's work *in toto* is the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of October. The revolutionary epic of the masses was created by an eyewitness and participant in great events, a true warrior, a poet of passionate revolutionary temperament.



Mayakovsky's work is permeated with the ideals of a revolutionary socialist and communist society. And since we are the flesh and blood of this society, his inspired poetry goes to our hearts. Mayakovsky made poetry out of the Revolution, socialism and Communism; and the living memorial raised by him in the people's consciousness is more majestic than any monument of granite and bronze.

Mayakovsky's poetry has become an integral part of Soviet culture. Service to the Revolution, the Party, and the people was the main and vital principle of this great poet. All his work is permeated with fiery militant propaganda for Communism. Soviet literature and art are travelling along the road that was taken by Mayakovsky. This road is straight, decisive, unconditional — wholly recognised and approved by the Soviet people.

Mayakovsky's internationalist poetry has taken its place at the head of all the world's revolutionary and progressive poetry. The verse of the proletarian poet, in whom "the voice of the singer elevates class", has become a fighting weapon in the hands of the world's workers. This became possible because the main feature of Mayakovsky's work was Leninism. We must stress the simple but important fact that advanced art combined with an advanced ideal is the essence of Vladimir Mayakovsky's poetry.

Advanced art! He himself was its herald, creator, and embodiment. There is not a single poet on earth today who has gone further than Mayakovsky. He infinitely widened and deepened the expressive potentialities of verse. Rhyme, rhythm and image were fused in his verse so that they multiplied its force many times over. He did not bring poetry down to earth, but raised the slogan, the *agit-poem*, and the advertisement to the level of poetry. The enormous tasks facing the new literature were invariably solved by Mayakovsky in poetic terms. His most effective and unfailing weapon was verse — epic, lyrical, tragic and satirical — and he handled it with virtuoso skill.

What does Mayakovsky's great example tell those engaged in art and literature? Take the big themes, addressed directly to the masses. Paint canvases about what constitutes the essence and kingpin of our life: the building of Communism, the labour achievements of Soviet men and women, our great Party. The people will appreciate your efforts, and you yourselves, as you become equal to the great tasks, will rise up with them, will become better, wiser, purer.

It is impossible to distinguish between Mayakovsky the political thinker and Mayakovsky the lyrical poet. That model of political verse, the poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*, is lyricism unsurpassed. It is enough to quote one line: "...Here, what are those gaps in the presidium?...", and the subsequent description of the people's grief. Remember the

impressive account of the last farewell to Lenin. Remember, finally, the lyrical pathos of the ending.

But something else is indicative also. Not long before, Mayakovsky wrote the poem *It*. And in this highly lyrical work, the poet could not, and did not, want to insulate himself in the theme of love:

But what can I do  
if despite my plight  
with all my mental and spiritual powers  
I've believed  
and believe,  
whether wrong or right,  
in this world,  
this blessed life of ours.

Believing in this world, Mayakovsky believes in its Communist future:

*Let the waiting*

*be stretched out*

*to desperation,*

*yet I see it—*

*clear as hallucination,*

*so clear,*

*it seems*

*just finish with these rhymes,*

*and lo—*

*you land*

*in the most magnificent of times.*

Politics shot through with lyricism, and lyricism firmly bound up with politics—such was the poetry of Mayakovsky. What can we learn from Mayakovsky's "Party books"? He died in 1930; his poetry is alive to this day and will certainly outlive us all, passing on to the men and women of the Communist future. The viability of Mayakovsky's poetry is in that he did not separate poetry from reality, literature from the people, or art from Communism, but combined them in his creative work. Much has been said about Mayakovsky's innovations: the dislocation of the lines, the famous "step-ladder", the infusion of the language of the streets into poetic diction, the unconventionality of his rhymes, rhythms, similes and metaphors. This is all true. But during and after his time, there emerged poets who also wrote in stepped lines, who also introduced the language of the streets into their diction, and

who also excelled in shock rhymes and metaphors. But they have not left so great an impression on memory of the people. Mayakovsky's newness was a newness of a higher order. The poetic innovations are the newness of the Revolution, the newness of Soviet power, the newness of Communism. The fresh and furious wind of a new life, a new reality, and a new idea was raging over the country. This freshness sought and found fresh forms of expression in Mayakovsky's inspired poetry.

Communism is an age-old dream of mankind. Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella dreamed of it in *Utopia* and *The City of the Sun*. It found a scientific basis in the great teachings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and the First International was its first international organisation. But Communism first became a people's ideology in our country, which rose up under the banner of Lenin and the Leninist Party. And for millions of workers and peasants, soldiers and sailors back in 1917, the idea of Communism became triumphantly new, fresh and joyous. It did not sweep people aloft into the heavens, but resounded in slogans that were immediately put into practice: "Factories for the workers, land for the peasants, peace for the nations!" And such blinding prospects opened up before Communism, that people charged head-on into the whiteguard bullets for its sake, and hurled themselves bare-chested on to the barbed wire at Perekop.

This earthly content and this inspired dream both went into Mayakovsky's poetry. How can we not celebrate him? His poems have become for us a codex of Communist morality. Our countless "I's" have fused in his verse into a single "We". Mayakovsky—himself a brilliant individual—unconditionally rejected individualism for the sake of collectivism. He saw its highest example in the Leninist Party:

*The Party means millions  
of arms, brains, eyes  
linked  
and acting together.  
In a Party  
we'll rear our projects to the skies,  
upholding  
and helping  
one another.*

The social significance of Mayakovsky's poetry is that it sets an example of social conduct for Soviet men and women. The poet was proud of every success, however small, achieved by our new system, and was ruthless with any shortcoming, however slight. He did not struggle with them single-handed, but with the aid of the collective, as

is accepted in our country. Mayakovsky's poetry is sharply self-critical. It is enough to recall his cycle *Elephants in the Komsomol*. But this self-criticism is positive and effective; it helps to get rid of shortcomings. It is the diametrical opposite of the vindictive carping indulged in by the philistine and anti-Soviet elements.

In his verse, Mayakovsky created the attractive image of Soviet man—the master of his own country. Bold, free, without the blinkers of private ownership over his eyes, he advances with a confident stride towards Communism. The aim of Soviet society is Communism; but Communism is international. Mayakovsky, in becoming the spokesman of Communist ideals, also became an international poet.

As we review the poetry of our country, we see that Mayakovsky stands on a level with Pushkin, Lermontov and Nekrasov. The ideals of the Great October Revolution, which inspired his work, lent enormous scope to his poetry. With every passing year, the international prestige of the Soviet Union is growing, and with every passing year the influence of Mayakovsky's poetry of the revolutionary, democratic and progressive literature of the world grows correspondingly greater.

A great poet of the Soviet people, of the Leninist Party, and of Communism, Vladimir Mayakovsky towers like a giant over the 20th century.



## **Appendix**



## Dates in the Life and Work of Vladimir Mayakovsky

**1893**  
**7(19) July** In the village of Baghdadi near Kutaisi (now the village of Mayakovsky in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic), to the forester Vladimir Konstantinovich Mayakovsky and his wife Alexandra Alexeyevna, a son Vladimir is born.

**1902**  
**Autumn** Admitted to senior preparatory class at Kutaisi High School.

**1902-1903**  
Takes drawing lessons from artist S. P. Krasnukha.

**1905**  
**Spring** Student disturbances in Kutaisi. Becomes familiar with revolutionary legal and illegal literature brought from Moscow by his sister Lyudmila. Mayakovsky joins the Marxist circle at the High School.

**October-November** Takes part in a protest demonstration against the murder of N. E. Bauman.

**1906**  
**July** After the death of his father (19 February) moves to Moscow with his mother and sisters.

**August** Admitted to the Fourth Form of Moscow High School No. 5.

**1907**  
Through fellow students, becomes familiar with practical revolutionary work and is drawn into the revolutionary movement; joins the Social-Democratic circle at Moscow High School No. 3.

**1908**

**End of 1907 to  
beginning of  
1908**

Mayakovsky joins the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (Bolsheviks) and does propaganda work among the Moscow workers.

**1 March** Expelled from high school for non-payment of tuition fees.

**29 March-  
9 April** Mayakovsky's first arrest on the premises of the underground printing press of the Moscow Commit-



tee of the RSDLP(B) and his first term of imprisonment.

August Mayakovsky is placed under police surveillance.

30 August Enters the Stroganov College of Applied Arts.

11 October Mayakovsky is committed for trial at the Moscow Chamber of Justice in connection with the case concerning the underground printing press of the Moscow Committee of the RSDLP(B).

### 1909

18 January-  
27 February Mayakovsky arrested for the second time.

2 July Third arrest. While in prison (2 July-9 January, 1910), writes his first poems, which are confiscated on his release.

9 September Appears before the Moscow Chamber of Justice in connection with the case concerning the secret printing press of the Moscow Committee of the RSDLP(B). The security department postpones execution of the Chamber's sentence—"to be given over to the responsible supervision of the parents"—in connection with the continuing interrogations concerning the escape of political prisoners from the Novinskaya prison in Moscow.

### 1910

Beginning Mayakovsky gives up Party work and begins studying. "I want to create a socialist art" (V. Mayakovsky, *I Myself*).

First half Attends the studio of artist S. Yu. Zhukovsky over a period of four months.

Middle Prepares to enter the Moscow College of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, studies under the artist P. I. Kclin.

### 1911

August Mayakovsky enters the College of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture.

Beginning of  
September Meets D. D. Burlyuk.

24 November Speaks on behalf of the College students at the funeral of artist V. A. Serov.

1912

- 25 February First public speech at a debate on contemporary art, arranged by the *Jack of Diamonds* artists' society.
- Summer-  
Autumn Begins regular poetic composition. Writes the poems *Purple and White*, *Night*, *Morning*.
- Middle of  
November Reads poetry at *The Stray Dog*, an artists' cellar in Petersburg. Beginning of regular poetry readings in public.
- End of  
December Publication of the almanac *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, with a Futurist manifesto written in collaboration with V. Khlebnikov, D. Burlyuk, A. Kruchenykh and including his own poems *Night* and *Morning* (first appearance in print).

1913

- February-  
March Mayakovsky's poems *Port*, *Street Song*, *From Street to Street*, *And What About You?*, *To Shop Signs*, *Theatres*, *Something About Petersburg*, and *After a Woman* published in the almanacs *A Warren of Judges* and *Prayer Book for Three* and in the leaflet *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*.
- Spring Meets the poet N. N. Aseyev.
- 7 May Mayakovsky speaks at the "Society of Free Aesthetics" in Moscow in honour of K. Balmont.
- May Mayakovsky's first collection of verse published in a lithographed edition with illustrations by artists L. Zhegin and V. Cheprygin, and with cover by Mayakovsky.
- August Publication of the almanac *Dead Moon*, with poems by Mayakovsky.
- Beginning of  
October Meets K. I. Chukovsky.
- 19 October Reads his poem *Take That!* at the *Pink Lantern*, a Futurist club.
- 2 December First performance of the tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovsky* at the Luna-Park Theatre in Petersburg. Leading part played by the author.

4 December Second performance of the tragedy.

Middle of December to March, 1914 Mayakovsky, D. Burlyuk and V. Kamensky take part in a big Futurist tour of Russian towns and cities. Mayakovsky gives lectures and poetry readings in Kharkov, Simferopol, Sevastopol, Kerch, Odessa, Kishinev, Nikolayev, Kiev, Minsk, Kazan, Penza, Rostov, Saratov, Tiflis and Baku.

1914

13 February Mayakovsky speaks to a literary and artistic circle at a lecture by F. Marinetti.

15 February The newspaper *Nov* publishes a letter to the editor signed by Mayakovsky, K. Bolshakov and V. Shershenevich, in which "any line of succession from the Italo-Futurists" is repudiated by the Russian Futurists.

21 February Mayakovsky and D. Burlyuk are expelled from the College of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture for taking part in public Futurist functions.

March Publication of the tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovsky*.

12 and 13 April Mayakovsky gives talks and poetry reading in Kaluga.

18 July (1 August) Beginning of World War I.

21 July Mayakovsky reads his poem *War Has Been Declared* to a meeting at the Skobelev memorial.

August Begins writing texts for army broadsheets. Several drawings done by Mayakovsky himself.

1915

11 February Reads his poem *To You* in *The Stray Dog* artists' cellar.

Second half of February Publication of the almanac *The Archer* with extracts from the poem *Cloud in Pants*. First joint publication of the Futurists and the Symbolists in the same almanac.

25 February Speaks at *The Stray Dog* during an evening dedicated to the publication of the almanac *The Archer*. Gorky also speaks at this evening on the invitation of D. Burlyuk and V. Kamensky.

- 26 February Mayakovsky begins working for the journal *New Satirikon*.
- June Meets the artist I. Ye. Repin at K. I. Chukovsky's villa in Kuokkala near Petrograd.
- Beginning of July Journey to Mustamyaki to visit Gorky and read him the poem *Cloud in Pants*.
- End of July Finishes *Cloud in Pants*. Meets L. Yu. and O. M. Brik. Moves to Petrograd.
- Beginning of September Mayakovsky called up for military service.
- September Appearance of *Cloud in Pants* in a separate edition (Published by O. M. Brik, Petrograd).
- Autumn Finishes his poem *The Backbone Flute* and begins work on the poem *War and Peace*.
- December Publication of the almanac *Vzyl* with a leading article by Mayakovsky. Is invited by Gorky to become a permanent contributor to the journal *Letopis (Chronicle)*.
- 1916
- February *The Backbone Flute* published in a separate edition by O. M. Brik, Petrograd.
- 26 May Mayakovsky writes the poem *Lily Dear! In Lieu of a Letter*.
- October Publication of a collection of poems by Mayakovsky entitled *Simple as Bellowing* (Parus Publishers, Petrograd).
- 1917
- 26-27 February (11-12 March) Mayakovsky on the streets of Petrograd during the February Bourgeois Revolution.
- 11 and 12 (24 and 25) March Takes part in meetings of people engaged in the arts and makes a public protest against attempts by the Provisional Government to establish control over cultural life.
- 21 May (3 June) The poem *Revolution (A Poetry Chronicle)* published in the newspaper *Novaya Zhizn (New Life)*.
- 9 (22) August The poem *To Answer*, in which Mayakovsky calls on the soldiers of the Russian Army to oppose the imperialist war.
- 24 September (7 October) Gives a lecture "The Bolsheviks in Art" and reads his poems in Moscow.

- 25 October  
(7 November) The Great October Socialist Revolution. "To accept or not to accept? For me, such a question never arose.... My revolution." (V. Mayakovsky, *I Myself*.)
- Beginning of November Mayakovsky takes part in a conference, called by the All-Russia Central Executive Committee, of workers in the arts on cooperation with the Soviet administration.
- December The poem *War and Peace* published in a separate edition by Parus Publishers, Petrograd.
- 24 December  
(6 January) The couplet *Eat your pineapples, munch your grouse...* published on the cover of the magazine *Solovei* No. 1 as the caption for a cartoon.
- 1918
- End of January Mayakovsky reads his poem *Man* at an evening, *Encounter between Two Generations of Poets*. Among those present: K. Balmont, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Andrei Bely, Yu. Baltrushaitis, D. Burluk, V. Kamensky, I. Ehrenburg, V. Khodasevich, Marina Tsvetayeva, B. Pasternak, A. Tolstoy, P. Antokolsky, V. Inber, and others.
- Second half of February The poem *Man* published, and also the second (uncensored) edition of *Cloud in Pants*.
- 27 February Mayakovsky appears at an evening, *Election of the King of Poets*.
- March-May Writes the film scenarios *Not Born for Money*, *The Young Lady and the Hooligan*, *Chained in Film* and also appears as the leading character in these films.
- 27 September First reading of *Mystery-Bouffe* at home to his friends, including A. V. Lunacharsky, directors, and artists.
- For the first anniversary of the October Revolution *Mystery-Bouffe* and the collection *Rye Word* published in a separate edition.
- 7 November Première of *Mystery-Bouffe* at the Petrograd Musical Comedy Theatre. Direction by Vsevolod Meyerhold.
- 27 November Mayakovsky takes part in a session of the State Council for the Arts.

- 7 December First edition of the newspaper *Art of the Commune*, with Mayakovsky's poem *An Order for the Army of the Arts* instead of a leading article.
- 17 December Reads his poem *Left March* for the first time at an evening in the Sailors' Theatre (formerly the Gvardeisky Ekipazh).
- December Gives lectures and reads poems to the workers of Petrograd.
- 1919
- 12 January The newspaper *Art of the Commune* No. 7 publishes *Left March*.
- Beginning of March Mayakovsky moves to Moscow.
- Middle of May Publication of the collection *Everything Written by Mayakovsky*.
- October A *Soviet Alphabet* published anonymously. Mayakovsky begins work for the Telegraph Agency of Russia (ROSTA) on texts and cartoons for Satirical Windows.
- 1920
- 28 April Mayakovsky reads his poem *Vladimir Ilyich* in Press House at an evening dedicated to Lenin's 50th birthday.
- May The studio of the Moscow Theatre of Satire stages Mayakovsky's playlet *What If? First-of-May Dreams in a Bourgeois Armchair*.
- 1921
- Beginning Publication of the collection *Liren* with the poem *An Amazing Adventure of Vladimir Mayakovsky*.
- 29 January Première of *A Playlet about Priests that Wist Not What a Festival Is For* at the Moscow Theatre of Revolutionary Satire.
- April The journal *BOV* (Funsters' Strike Force) publishes the poem *On Scum*.
- End of April 150,000,000 published anonymously.
- 1 May Première of *Mystery-Bouffe* at RSFSR Theatre No. I, under Vsevolod Meyerhold's direction.
- End of June Three performances of *Mystery-Bouffe* in German

(translated by Rita Reit) for delegates of the 3rd Comintern Congress.

- 29 August The poem *Two Not Quite Ordinary Incidents* appeared in the one-day newspaper *Help!* printed by Izvestia Publishers for assistance to the starving people in the Volga region.
- 19 September Evening: "Dyuvlam" (Vladimir Mayakovsky's twelfth anniversary of creative work).
- December Mayakovsky speaks at debates and reads poems on a number of occasions in Kharkov.
- 1922
- 1-2 March The poem *Order No. 2 for the Army of the Arts* published in the journal *Veshch*, Berlin.
- 5 March The newspaper *Izvestia* publishes the poem *Conference-Crazy* under the heading—*Our Daily Life: To the Conference-Crazy*. Beginning of Mayakovsky's work as a contributor to *Izvestia*.
- 6 March Addressing the Communist faction of the All-Russia Congress of Metal-Workers, V. I. Lenin speaks highly of the poem *Conference-Crazy*.
- End of March Publication of a separate edition of the poem *I Love*.
- 12 April *Izvestia* publishes the poem *My Speech at the Genoa Conference*.
- 2-13 May Mayakovsky's first trip abroad, to Latvia. Under the influence of his impressions, writes the poem *How a Democratic Republic Works*, and others.
- May The journal *Krasnaya Nov* publishes the poem *The 4th International*; publication of a collection of satirical poems entitled *Mayakovsky Pokes Fun*.
- July Mayakovsky writes his autobiography *I Myself* (published in the first half of February 1923 in the two-volume *13 Years of Work*, Vol. I).
- September *Izvestia* publishes Parts 1 and 2 of the poem *The 5th International*.
- Beginning of October Appearance of Volume II of Mayakovsky's two-volume *13 Years of Work*.
- 9 October-
- 13 December Mayakovsky goes to Germany and France; gives lectures and poetry readings in Berlin and Paris; impressions of the trip recorded in the lectures:

	<i>What Is Berlin Doing?, What Is Paris Doing?</i> ; also in essays published in <i>Izvestia</i> and the journal <i>Krasnaya Niva</i> , and in the poems <i>Germany, Paris</i> , and others.
End of December to 11 February 1923	Mayakovsky works on the poem <i>It</i> .
Beginning of January	1923
First half of February	Publication of the collection <i>Mayakovsky for Voice</i> .
Second half of February	Publication of Vol. I of the two-volume <i>13 Years of Work</i> .
First half of March	Publication of the collection <i>Selected Mayakovsky</i> .
Second half of March	Private reading of <i>It</i> . A. V. Lunacharsky among those present.
End of March	In connection with Lenin's illness, Mayakovsky writes the poem <i>We Don't Believe It</i> , printed in the Agitprop Press Bureau Bulletin of the Central Committee under the heading <i>Lenin</i> . The poem widely published in various towns and cities all over the Soviet Union.
Second half of April	First number of the journal <i>LEF</i> appears, edited by Mayakovsky.
12 May	Publication of the collection <i>Mayakovsky Smiles. Mayakovsky Laughs. Mayakovsky Pokes Fun</i> .
First half of June to 1st July	Mayakovsky reads <i>Left March</i> at protest meetings about the murder of V. V. Vorovsky and about the Curzon ultimatum.
3 July to 18 September approximately	Publication in a separate edition of the poem <i>It</i> . Mayakovsky begins work on advertisements for state trade and industrial enterprises.
July-September	Trip to Germany, under the impression of which he writes the poems <i>Norderney, Moscow-Königsberg</i> .
	Publication of the books <i>225 Pages of Mayakovsky; Verses about the Revolution; Away, Moonshine!; No Help Needed from Wizard, or God, or Angels of</i>



*God; Rites; Tale of a Deserter*—the last four illustrated by Mayakovsky.

17 October Attends the Bolshoi Theatre for the fiftieth birthday celebrations in honour of Valery Bryusov.

End of December Publication of the collection *The Mayakovsky Gallery*, with cover and drawings by the author.

1924

Early January In LEF No. 4, the poem *To the Workers of Kursk Who Mined the First Ore; A Temporary Monument by Vladimir Mayakovsky*; publication of the collection *The Things of This Year*.

Middle of January Mayakovsky gives lectures and poetry readings in Kiev and Kharkov.

22 January Present at a session of the 11th All-Russia Congress of Soviets at which M. I. Kalinin announces the death of V. I. Lenin on 21st January.

27 January Attends Lenin's funeral in Red Square.

Second half of February Gives lectures and poetry readings in Gomel, Vinnitsa, Odessa and Kiev.

From about 15 April to 9 May Trip to Germany, during which, on 29 April, Mayakovsky makes a speech and reads poetry at an evening in Berlin arranged by the German Section of the All-Russia Union of Press Workers; under the impressions of this visit, writes his poem *Two Berlins*.

Second half of May Gives lectures and poetry readings in Leningrad.

May-June On the occasion of the 125th anniversary of Pushkin's birthday, writes the poem *Jubilee*.

First half of July Publication of the collection *About Kursk, about the Komsomol, about May, about Flight, about Chaplin, about Germany, about Oil, about the 5th International, etc.*

August LEF No. 2 publishes *Jubilee*.

3 August The poem *Proletariat, Strangle the War at Birth!* published in *Izvestia*.

- About 20 August to middle of September Mayakovsky gives lectures and poetry readings in Sevastopol, Yalta, Novorossiisk, and Vladikavkaz.
- 21 October Reads the poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* to members of the Moscow Party organisation in the Red Hall of the Moscow Committee of the RCP(B).
- 24 October to 27 December Trip to France via Latvia and Germany; under the impressions of this journey, writes the cycle of poems *Paris*.
- 23 November Present at the taking of the ashes of Jean Jaurès to the Pantheon (the poem *Jaurès*).
- 14 December Mayakovsky is present at the ceremonial hoisting of the flag on the building of the USSR representation in Paris after the establishment of diplomatic relations with France (commemorated in the poem *The Flag*).
- 1925
- 9 January Mayakovsky speaks twice at the 1st All-Russia Conference of Proletarian Writers.
- 26-28 January Gives lectures and reads poems, including *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*, in Smolensk and Minsk.
- Beginning of February Gives lectures and reads poems, including the poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*, in Kiev. Publication in Leningrad, in a separate edition, of the poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*; previously, extracts and separate parts of the poem had been distributed in bulletins by the Press Bureau of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), and had been published repeatedly in newspapers and magazines in a number of towns and cities in the Soviet Union.
- Middle of February Publication of the collection *Only the New*.
- 3 March Mayakovsky is present at a session of the Literature Commission of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) to discuss the Central Committee's proposed resolution on creative literature.
- May Publication of the children's book *The Tale of Little Peter, the Heavy Eater, and of Sim, Who Was Very Slim*.
- 25 May Mayakovsky goes to France via Germany and decides on a voyage round the world.

- June Advertising posters with Mayakovsky's captions are exhibited at the All-World Arts and Industrial Exposition in Paris; Mayakovsky awarded a silver medal.
- 21 June-8 July Mayakovsky leaves France for America on the SS *Hispania*; during the crossing, writes the poems: *Spain*, *6 Nuns*, *The Atlantic Ocean*, *Shallow Philosophy in Deep Waters*, *Black and White*, *Christopher Columbus*.
- July Meets the artist Diego di Rivera and Mexican Communists in Mexico, writes the poems *Mexico* and *Devotions*.
- 27 July Mayakovsky arrives in the USA.
- 30 July Mayakovsky arrives in New York. During his visit to the USA, Mayakovsky gives lectures on Soviet literature and poetry readings in New York, Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh; he meets progressive American writers. Mayakovsky's poems are published in American communist papers; publication of the collection *To the Americans as a Memento*; separate editions of the poems *The Sun Visits Mayakovsky (An Amazing Adventure)* and *How I Discovered America (Christopher Columbus)*, with drawings by D. Burlyuk.
- 28 October Mayakovsky sails from New York on the SS *Rochambeau* for France. During the crossing, writes the poem *Homewards*.
- 7 November Speaks at the USSR representation in Paris.
- 12 November Lecture and poetry reading at an evening arranged by the Society of Students of the USSR in France.
- 22 November Returns to Moscow via Berlin and Riga.
- December Four lectures in Moscow on the trip to America, accompanied by poetry readings. During his absence, six books of Mayakovsky's published, including the collection *Paris*, and the children's book *What Is Good and What Is Bad*.
- 1926
- January In Leningrad, Mayakovsky gives lectures and reads his poems about America.

- End of January  
to beginning of  
March Lectures and poetry readings in Kharkov, Kiev,  
Rostov, Krasnodar, Baku, and Tiflis.
- 11 April Speaks at a debate on Shengeli's book *How to Write  
Articles, Verse, and Short Stories*.
- 25 April Speaks at the anniversary of the Meyerhold  
Theatre.
- Second half of  
April The poem *To Segrei Yesenin* published in a separate  
edition.
- 5 May Beginning of Mayakovsky's work for the news-  
paper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.
- Second half of  
May to 13 June Lectures and poetry readings in Leningrad. *Kom-  
somolskaya Pravda* publishes the poem *An Epistle  
to the Proletarian Poets*.
- End of June to  
middle of August Mayakovsky lectures and gives poetry readings in  
Odessa, Simferopol, Yevpatoria, Sevastopol,  
Yalta, Alupka, Kharaks and Gurzuf.
- June The poem *Conversation with a Tax Inspector About  
Poetry* published in a separate edition.
- August The collection *Spain, Ocean, Havana, Mexico,  
America* and the book of essays *How I Discovered  
America*.
- 22 August *Izvestia* publishes the poem *To Comrade  
Nette—Steamer and Man*.
- 19 September *Izvestia* publishes the poem *The Hooligan*.
- Beginning of  
October Mayakovsky gives lectures and poetry readings in  
Leningrad.
- October Publication of the verse collection *Selected Selec-  
tions*.
- Second half of  
October Mayakovsky gives lectures and poetry readings in  
Kiev.
- Beginning of  
November Gives lectures and poetry readings in Kharkov,  
Poltava, Dniepropetrovsk; and then in Voronezh.  
Rostov, Taganrog, Novocherkassk and Krasnodar.

- December The journal *Novy Mir* publishes the poem *A Chat in Odessa Harbour Between s. s. "Soviet Daghestan" and "Red Abkhazia"*.
- 1927
- Beginning of January First number of the journal *New LEF* comes out, edited by Mayakovsky.
- 16 January to 2 February Lectures and poetry readings in Nizhni Novgorod, Kazan, Penza, Samara and Saratov.
- 7 February Mayakovsky takes part in a conference of workers in the arts, convoked in the Kremlin by the Commission under the Central Executive Committee of the USSR for the organisation of the festivities to commemorate the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution.
- February The poem *To Our Young People* appears in *New LEF* No. 2.
- 18 February to 2 March Gives lectures and poetry readings in Tula, Kursk, Kharkov and Kiev.
- 21 March Gives lectures and poetry readings in Yaroslavl.
- 23 March Mayakovsky delivers an address and makes the closing speech in the big auditorium of the Polytechnical Museum at a debate *Lef or Bluff*.
- End of March Gives lectures and poetry readings in Smolensk, Vitebsk and Minsk.
- 15 April to 22 May Mayakovsky goes to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany and France; during the trip, gives lectures and poetry readings in Prague, Paris, Berlin and Warsaw; during his stay in these countries, meets the writers Maria Meyerova, Julius Fučík, Julian Tuvm, and many others; under the impressions of his journey, writes the sketches *That's How I Travelled*, *A Czech Pioneer*, *Above Warsaw*, etc; also the poems *The Slavonic Question Is Easily Settled*, *Cast-Iron Breeches*, and others.
- 16 April The poem *Lenin Is with Us* published in the newspaper *Trud*.
- Middle of June Gives lectures and poetry readings in Tver and Leningrad.
- 25 June Gives a lecture and poetry reading in Vladimir.
- June Publication of Vol. V of the *Collected Works* (the first to come out).

- July The article *How Is Verse To Be Made?* published separately, and the poem *The Venus de Milo and Vyacheslav Polonsky* in the journal *New LEF* No. 5.
- End of July to 15 September Mayakovsky gives lectures and poetry readings in Kharkov, Lugansk, Stalino, Simferopol, Alushta, Gurzuf, Alupka, Yalta, Yevpatoria, Livadia, Kharaks, Simeiz, Pyatigorsk, Yessentuki, and Kislovodsk.
- 20 September First reading of the poem *Fine!* at an editorial conference of the journal *New LEF*; A. V. Lunacharsky present at the reading.
- 4 October *Komsomolskaya Pravda* publishes the poem *A Letter to Molchanov's Beloved, Abandoned by Him, as Announced in "Komsomolskaya Pravda" No. 219, in the Poem Entitled. "Rendezvous"*.
- 18 October Mayakovsky reads the poem *Fine!* at the Moscow Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) before members of the Moscow Party organisation.
- Middle of October First separate edition of the poem *Fine!*
- End of October to beginning of November Mayakovsky gives lectures and readings of his poems, including *Fine!*, in Leningrad.
- 6 November Première of the play *The Twenty-Fifth* based on *Fine!* in the Leningrad Little Opera Theatre. Direction by N. V. Smolich.
- 8 November Mayakovsky speaks in the Red Hall of the Moscow Committee of the RCP(B) at a literary evening organised by the Moscow Committee of the Komsomol.
- Middle of November At his flat in Gendrikov Pereulok, Mayakovsky meets the American writer Theodore Dreiser.
- End of November to middle of December Mayakovsky gives lectures and readings of *Fine!* in Kharkov, Rostov, Novocherkassk, Taganrog, Armavir, Baku and Tiflis.
- 1928
- January Mayakovsky's article "The Workers and Peasants Don't Understand You" published in the journal *New LEF* No. 1.

- End of January  
to beginning of  
February Mayakovsky gives lectures and readings of *Fine!*  
and other poems in Kazan, Sverdlovsk, Perm and  
Vyatka.
- 18 February *Pravda* publishes Mayakovsky's poem *Foundry-  
man Ivan Kozyrev's Story of How He Moved into a  
New Flat*.
- End of February  
to beginning of  
March Mayakovsky gives lectures and readings of *Fine!*  
and other poems in Dnepropetrovsk, Zaporozhye,  
Berdichev, Zhitomir and Kiev.
- Second half of  
March Gives lectures and readings of *Fine!* and other  
poems in Kiev, Vinnitsa and Odessa.
- March-April Publication of children's books: *The Fiery Horse*,  
*Any Page You Set Your Eye on There's an  
Elephant or Lion*.
- 17 July Mayakovsky present at the opening of the 6th  
Comintern Congress.
- End of July to  
beginning of  
August Gives lectures and poetry readings in Alupka,  
Simeiz, Yalta, Yevpatoria, Saki, Gurzuf, Miskhor  
and Simferopol.
- September Publication of the collection *N. P.* (New poems).
- 2nd September Poem *The Secret of Youth*, under the heading *Song  
of Liveliness*, published in the one-day newspaper  
*The Legions Are Coming*, issued by the Moscow  
Committee of the Komsomol.
- 26 September Mayakovsky makes a speech *Left of LEF* in the  
Politechnical Museum.
- End of Sep-  
tember to begin-  
ning of October Gives lectures and poetry readings in Leningrad.
- Beginning of  
October to be-  
ginning of  
November Mayakovsky goes on a trip to Germany and France.  
Under the impressions of this trip, writes *Lines  
about Architectural Beauty* and others.
- 28 October In Paris, on the premises of the Union of Russian  
Workers, gives a lecture on Soviet literature and a  
poetry reading.

- 5 November Mayakovsky meets Louis Aragon in Paris. Meets T. A. Yakovleva.
- November Publication of Vols. I and II of the *Collected Works*.
- 22 December Mayakovsky addresses a gathering of writers at a discussion of the report *On the Party's Policy in the Field of Literature*.
- 26 December First reading of the play *The Bedbug* to his friends at his flat in Gendrikov Pereulok.
- 30 December Reading of *The Bedbug* at an enlarged session of the Artistic and Political Council of the Meyerhold Theatre.
- 1929
- January The poem *A Letter to Comrade Kostrov from Paris on the Essence and Meaning of Love* published in the journal *Molodaya Gvardia* No. 1.
- First half of January Reading of *The Bedbug* at the Central Committee of the Komsomol and in Moscow clubs. Publication of Vol. III of the *Collected Works*, and the booklet *Read and Travel to Paris and China*.
- Middle of January Mayakovsky gives lectures and readings of *The Bedbug* and other poems in Kharkov.
- 20 January The newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* publishes the poem *A Conversation with Comrade Lenin*.
- February The play *The Bedbug*, with illustrations by the artists Kukryniksy<sup>1</sup>, published in *Molodaya Gvardia* Nos. 3 and 4.
- 13 February Première of *The Bedbug* at the Meyerhold Theatre (direction by Vsevolod Meyerhold).
- Middle of February to April Trip to Czechoslovakia, Germany and France; under the impressions of the journey, writes the poems *All Quiet in the West*, *The Parisienne*, and others.
- Spring Vol. IV of the *Collected Works* published.
- July Mayakovsky writes *My Soviet Passport*; published posthumously in the journal *Ogonyok* No. 12, 1930. Publication of the collection *Elephants in the Komsomol*.
- Middle of July to middle of August Gives lectures and poetry readings in Sochi,

<sup>1</sup> *Kukryniksy*—a compound name for three artists, Mikhail Kupriyanov, Porfiri Krylov and Nikolai Sokolov, who worked together.—*Tr.*



	Khosta, Gagra, Miskhor, Simeiz, Yalta, Alupka, Gurzuf, Livadia, Yevpatoria, and Saki.
August	<i>The Bedbug</i> published in a separate edition.
Middle of September	Mayakovsky finishes his play <i>The Bath House</i> .
22 September	Reading of <i>The Bath House</i> to friends.
23 September	Reading of <i>The Bath House</i> at a session of the Artistic and Political Council of the Meyerhold Theatre.
September	Publication of the collection <i>A School Mayakovsky</i> .
8 October	Speaks at an evening, <i>Opening of REF</i> .
Middle of October	Gives lectures and reads poetry and extracts from his plays in Leningrad.
29 October	Reads the <i>The Bath House</i> over the radio.
November	The journal <i>Chudak</i> publishes the poem <i>Khrenov's Story of Kuznetskstroï and Its Builders</i> .
End of October to December	Mayakovsky reads <i>The Bath House</i> in various Moscow workers' clubs.
December	Publication of the collection <i>There and Back</i> .
30 December	Twentieth anniversary of his literary work celebrated at Mayakovsky's flat by his friends.
1930	
9 January	Speaks at a factory club at Kolpino near Leningrad.
16 January	Speaks at a plenary session of REF.
21 January	At the Bolshoi Theatre, during an evening held in commemoration of Lenin, Mayakovsky reads part three of the poem <i>Vladimir Ilyich Lenin</i> .
End of January	Publication of Volume VI of the <i>Collected Works</i> .
1 February	Opening of the exhibition <i>20 Years of Work</i> ; first public reading of the poem <i>Aloud and Straight</i> .
6 February	At a conference of MAPP <sup>1</sup> , announces that he is joining RAPP <sup>2</sup> .
10 February	<i>Aloud and Straight</i> (first introduction to the poem) published in the journal <i>Oktyabr</i> No. 2.

<sup>1</sup> MAPP—Moscow (branch of) Association of Proletarian Writers.

<sup>2</sup> RAPP—All-Russia Association of Proletarian Writers.

- 15 and 22 February Mayakovsky speaks at the closing of the exhibition *Twenty Years of Work*.
- 25 February Speaks at a debate *The Ways of Soviet Literature*.
- 28 February Reads scenario of the circus show *Moscow's Burning* at a session of the Artistic and Political Council of the Central Board of the State Circus at the Trekhgornaya Manufactura Factory.
- Beginning of March Opening of the exhibition (5 March) *Twenty Years of Work* and public appearances in Leningrad.
- 16 March Première of *The Bath House* at the Meyerhold Theatre. Direction by Vsevolod Meyerhold.
- 25 March Mayakovsky speaks at the Krasnaya Presnya Komsomol Centre at the exhibition *Twenty Years of Work*.
- 29 March Gives a poetry reading to workers of the Hammer and Sickle Factory.
- 9 April Addresses students at the Institute of Economics in Moscow.
- 14 April at 10.15 hrs. In his study (in Lubyansky Proyezd, Moscow), Mayakovsky takes his own life by shooting himself with a revolver. Leaves a letter addressed *To Everybody* dated 12 April.
- 15-17 April The workers of Moscow take their last farewell of Mayakovsky. 150,000 file past the bier.
- 17 April Funeral gathering in the courtyard of the writers' club and cremation of Mayakovsky's body.

\* \* \*

1938

- Beginning of October The USSR Council of People's Commissars accepts Mayakovsky's works as state property.

1940

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Mayakovsky's death, the village of Baghdadi is renamed Mayakovsky, and Sadovo-Triumfalnaya Square becomes Mayakovsky Square.

1958

A memorial to the poet erected in Mayakovsky Square.

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